AGENCY AND TRAUMA IN SYRIAN REFUGEE LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS

by

Susan Arthur

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of English

Middle Tennessee State University

December 2023

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Martha Hixon, Chair

Dr. Will Brantley

Dr. Allen Hibbard

Dr. Rhonda McDaniel

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, Anica, the main reason I decided to face some of the ghosts of my past, because “there is no future without forgiveness” (Desmond Tutu), to my mother—whose endless love and ceaseless hope has carried me through—and finally to all the “helpers,” especially Frau Chance: thank you for risking your life to save ours.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I cannot thank Dr. Hixon enough. You have been what the Germans call a true "Doktormutter," and I am forever grateful for all your mentoring and support. I would also like to thank my dissertation committee for their insights and guidance. My greatest gratitude goes to my husband, whose unwavering support and love made it possible to finish my degree, write a dissertation, and process some of my trauma.

ABSTRACT

The Arab Spring of 2010 sparked a Syrian revolution that unfortunately turned into a civil war, in which the Syrian government, ruled by the autocratic al-Assad family for decades, crushed any democratic civic movement under the disguise of fighting Islamist terrorists. After more than a decade of conflict, Syria is fragmented into pieces and suffers from famines, diseases, and a collapsed economy. As historian David W. Lesch explains, an estimated $300 billion "will be needed to reconstruct the country," and "about five hundred thousand Syrians have been killed in the war, with over half of the population either internally or externally displaced" (180). This is the socio-political background for the autobiographies, (journalistic) biographies, fictionalized novels, graphic works, and picture books that address the Syrian war. This dissertation investigates how agency affects trauma for the protagonists in the literature, specifically texts aimed at children and young adults. Research questions include: What actions are the characters taking to increase their agency? How does trauma affect their daily lives? How are the children and young adults supported by the grownups? And what about their situation makes agency particularly important as a coping strategy? The theoretical framework for my analysis is trauma theory and some interdisciplinary approaches in regards to agency.

Both trauma theory and interdisciplinary approaches to children's agency have become major topics in literary fields of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Additionally, trauma studies and approaches focused on agency display strong connections to children's refugee literature, which was slowly developing at the same time, with works published after WWII. The connectedness of children and young adults

to their parents, caregivers, and community at large is the lens I am applying regarding agency as it is reflected in children's literature. This is a lens that includes in its perspective a positive attitude towards children and young adults with a focus on their capabilities, resourcefulness, resilience, and self-determination and also an optimistic viewpoint on children within their families and communities and their interactions with adults and the adult world. My understandings of agency within Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults rely, for example, on children's literature concepts from Marah Gubar and Richard Flynn, modern psychological viewpoints from Bessel van der Kolk, and sociological studies from Frederica Cavazonni and others. This interdisciplinary approach demonstrates that agency exerts a powerful and positive effect on trauma, mitigating some of trauma's devastating (long-term) consequences.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION
AGENCY AND TRAUMA IN SYRIAN REFUGEE LITERATURE

"No one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark…"

(Warsan Shire qtd. in Atia Abawi's *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* 284)

The history of fleeing one's country is an old one that has been told for thousands of years. Even the first man and woman in the Judeo-Christian tradition had to leave Paradise after being banished by God, and the exodus of the Jewish people is one of the oldest refugee narratives. The narrative is similar for all refugees, though the process of fleeing one's country has changed over the centuries, especially with modern technologies such as global positioning systems (GPS) on smartphones, an immediate interconnectedness via the world wide web, and internet sites that offer smuggling services. The *Oxford English Dictionary On-Line* states that the term "refugee" initially referred to a "Protestant who fled France to seek refuge elsewhere from religious persecution in the 17th and 18th centuries." However, the term has since been used to include anyone involuntarily leaving "his or her home and seeking refuge elsewhere, esp. in a foreign country, from war, religious persecution, political troubles, the effects of a natural disaster, etc." (*OED*). A refugee narrative, then, includes an unbearable home situation, an (usually) arduous and dangerous journey, and the difficulties of adjusting to a new life either in a refugee camp or in a (frequently antagonistic) host country. It also includes an array of complicated, but often comparable, feelings shared by all humans forced to leave their homeland. A refugee narrative is, to be sure, a narrative of trauma.

Cathy Caruth, one of the founders of trauma studies, states in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* that "the originary meaning of trauma itself (in both English and German), [was] the Greek *trauma*, or 'wound,' originally referring to an injury inflicted on the body" (3). She continues to explain that "In its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, . . . the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind," an unhealable wound that repeats itself in "the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivors" (3-4). Trauma was inflicted onto the Syrian people on a large scale when their country was suddenly plummeted into a civil war in the second decade of the 21st century. Peaceful protesters were met with brutal force by the government under the president, Bashar al-Assad, and the conflicts escalated into a civil war. Jessica Goudeau describes in *After the Last Border: Two Families and the Story of Refuge in America* that by 2018 an "estimated 13.1 million people were in need in Syria. There were now 3.3 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, 1.5 million in Lebanon, over a million in Jordan" (278).

Syrians have responded in a multitude of ways to their civil war—by joining the war forces, by escaping, by trying to survive in a war-torn county, and so on. Both Syrian and non-Syrian writers have chronicled the refugee experience, some of them in a journalist style, others in (auto)biographical or fictionalized accounts, for both adult and child audiences. In this current study, I am primarily focusing on the works for children and young adults, which include picture books, graphic novels, (auto)biographical narratives, and fictional works. Perhaps surprisingly, the themes in the literature for young people and that for adults are mostly the same (with the exception of prostitution and sexual child exploitation); though adjusted for age appropriateness, the works for

children and young adults are not "dumbed down" in how they portray the trauma that Syrian refugees have endured, but rather convey to their audiences truths and realities in manageable images and stories.

In the literature for children and young adults, I have found that agency plays a significant role in dealing with the trauma caused by the war. It is this connection between agency and trauma that I am probing in my dissertation. Simply put, trauma is easier to handle when one has agency, and trauma is more difficult to manage when individuals feel powerless. In basic terms, agency is "the feeling of being in charge of your life: knowing where you stand, knowing that you have a say in what happens to you, knowing that you have some ability to shape your circumstances" (Kolk 97).[1] As the title of the dissertation suggests, I am examining how agency (and lack of agency) affects Syrian children and young adults (and I will include discussions about adults when appropriate) who have become refugees. Trauma is often exaggerated by lack of agency due to a total sense of helplessness and loss of control during traumatic experiences. Conversely, trauma is reduced by a sense of agency, especially for children and young

[1] However, for the medical or psychiatric community, a more body-specific definition becomes relevant for understanding and treating trauma and also for preventing it. Therefore, Bessel van der Kolk explains that "Agency starts with what scientists call interoception, our awareness of our subtle sensory, body-based feelings: the greater that awareness, the greater our potential to control our lives. Knowing *what* we feel is the first step to knowing *why* we feel that way. If we are aware of the constant changes in our inner and outer environment, we can mobilize to manage them" (98). Kolk further elucidates that without a strong connection to one's body, the person is unable to self-regulate and also loses the ability to use their imagination to find solutions or alternatives to their problems (98, 99).

adults, since they tend to have less agency in their lives even in times of peace due to their age, lack of experience, and societal norms.

My personal perspective on agency not only entails a sense of self-determination in the large matters of life, but also small choices to make life more bearable and to deal with trauma effectively, and for children, the small choices are the ones most relevant to their own lives. In the literature (for young people and adults), these choices entail, for example, using humor to cope with difficult situations, selecting to share over hoarding in the face of limited resources, expressing kindness to others, electing to pursue an education or art in the midst of war and chaos, and deciding to seek connections to others and to express love and caring when one could instead plummet into despair, loneliness or hopelessness. And love, as it turns out, is the biggest guard against trauma, especially for children and young adults (Kolk 52, 56, 306). Love is also the foundation for children and young adults to be able to exhibit agency, because when they have been loved by their caregivers, they can develop the inner resilience needed in the face of adversity. This fact is a key element of the Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults: the children and young adults depicted in these works, both fictional as well as autobiographical narratives, have not experienced trauma at the hands of their caregivers and are first exposed to trauma when the Syrian war starts. Though these children do not come from perfect homes (such a thing does not exist anyway), they are portrayed as coming from loving and supportive families, something that is extremely important in their relationship to trauma and agency.

My interest in agency and trauma in Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults is the result of being personally familiar with escaping from one's country and having lived the first eight years of my life in Syria. I was not a war refugee, but my experiences fleeing Syria as a child with my mother and older brother to escape my abusive father, whose violence was escalating, as well as the process of assimilation to a new country, mirror that of refugees. I am familiar with how the refugee experience of fleeing one's country and trying to make a new life is often traumatizing. And though my own experiences happened many years ago, their repercussions linger. Trauma does not simply dissolve once the situation is over. Trauma finds a way to embed itself into one's psyche and to remain until one can find a way to process it, integrate it into one's life story. Consequently, I cannot help but read and analyze this literature through a personal lens of ongoing recovery from similar past experiences. Though my writing in the dissertation is focused on analyzing how agency and trauma are embedded in Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults, because of the unique perspective that I bring as a fellow refugee to this scholarship, I thus added a postscript to this dissertation in the form of a short memoir that parallels in many ways those works under consideration.

Particularly in literature for children, the connectedness of children and young adults to their parents, caregivers, and community at large mitigates trauma by focusing on their capabilities, resourcefulness, resilience, and self-determination. My understanding of agency within children's and young adult literature relies heavily on work done by Marah Gubar and Richard Flynn, who argue against the then-dominant perception of children's alterity and inability to be agents, mostly in cultural production.

In contrast, Flynn and Gubar focus on young people's connectedness and similarities to adults and explore ways children and young adults express their involvement in cultural production and agency with(in) the literature.

I, too, am looking primarily for the moments in literary works when children and young adults demonstrate capability and prefer to focus on their strengths rather than their inabilities; for example, when they are using their ingenuity to escape a dangerous situation. As Flynn argues, agency "implies the ability to act, it is not synonymous with authority" ("What Are We Talking about when We Talk about Agency?" 257). In other words, young people might not always have authority in their lives, but that does not preclude them from expressing agency. Flynn proposes that "adults may help children learn to negotiate and even collaborate in making children's texts and culture, rather than impose culture on them…" ("What Are We Talking about When We Talk about Agency?" 257). Such a positive model is also theorized by Marah Gubar, whose theoretical framework is helpful as a foundation to viewing the Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults. Gubar proposes a kinship model that within the field of children's literature and childhood studies takes into account the interconnectedness of young people and adults and their individual agency irrespective of their age ("The Hermeneutics of Recuperation: What a Kinship-Model Approach to Children's Agency Could Do for Children's Literature and Childhood Studies").

Works by various trauma studies scholars greatly inspired my exploration of refugee literature for children. One such is Cathy Caruth, who believes that "the language of trauma—and the attempts to bear witness to it— [are closely tied] to the language of

literature" (*Unclaimed Experience* 117). Caruth's argument that the current questions of who is speaking and who is allowed a voice are already to be found in her work (*Unclaimed Experience* 118). This is particularly relevant to my studies in terms of giving children and young adults a voice, which is a significant part of having agency. Moreover, Caruth asserts that the juncture between the individual and the collective trauma cannot be severed from each other as well as from larger political and social considerations (121). I concur with Caruth and believe that literary texts, especially when written as a response to a political event, in this case the Syrian war, need to be considered comprehensively.

Dominick LaCapra also argues for a broader perspective in the evaluation of trauma within a historical context. He finds it "astonishing how little historians recognize the significance of individual and collective trauma even when they write of events and processes in which it is prevalent, such as genocide, wars, rape…" (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* ix). For LaCapra, trauma is not merely significant on an individual level but "has crucial connections to social and political conditions and can only be understood and engaged with respect to them" (xi). Furthermore, LaCapra is also interested in the significance of voice and who is able to articulate the traumatic event. As a historian he is therefore particularly interested in testimonies, but also visual accounts. Thus, providing children and young adults with a voice of their own (first- as well as third-person accounts) in describing the Syrian war and their experiences as refugees strengthens their agency in dealing with their trauma.

Other scholars, who are more contemporary than Caruth and LaCapra, have also added new insights into trauma studies, and at times questioned their predecessors, often providing me with new ideas about trauma and agency. Moreover, I have found perceptions and literary analyses by scholars interested in refugee studies, such as Ekaterina Strekalova-Hughes and Cavazzoni, et al., helpful in my own literary interpretations. In regards to psychiatric readings of agency and trauma, I have used Bessel van der Kolk as my primary source since he is the most prominent present-day expert in psychiatric trauma studies. However, I have on occasion supplemented his words and ideas with information gained from additional renowned trauma therapists and experts.

Another scholar who has influenced my thinking on refugee literature for children, though I do not use her scholarship directly to interpret my readings, is Leyla Savsar, who, in "'Mother Tells Me to Forget': Nostalgic Re-presentations, Re-membering, and Re-telling the Child Migrant's Identity and Agency in Children's Literature," states that little has been written on diasporic children in children's literature (396) and quotes others in saying that there "are now calls for research that challenges the adult-centrism of migration research … and queries dominant views of migrant children as vulnerable, needy and powerless" (397). Savsar has a very positive perspective on how migrant children in children's literature are able to demonstrate agency and question power structures. Her analysis of works about three distinct ethnicities (Latino, Caribbean, Palestinian) "considers the role of child immigrants as agents of resisting exploitation and re-conceptualizing their identities through an autobiographical self-distancing" (389). For Savsar, children "play the significant role of inventors of culture

rather than mere appropriators or learners" (396). However, Savsar's focus remains in the realm of fiction and she does not investigate actual life narratives (396). In contrast, I am not only interested in fictional literary works but also narratives that are autobiographical. I find it difficult to separate world politics and political consequences, such as immigration and asylum policies, from the real people who are suffering from the Syrian war.

Considering the devastating effects of the Syrian war on its country and the millions of Syrian refugees, the question of a redemptive narrative, despite all efforts to use positive lenses in the analysis of the literature, remains. This is also one of the arguments in Holocaust studies, particularly as they relate to children's and young adult literature. There has been controversy about how to depict some of the Holocaust horrors in young people's literature and the question of if one leaves out the true extent of horrific situations in children's stories, does one still do justice to the victims or fulfill didactic purposes? These issues and questions about boundaries and audience appropriateness have come up particularly in Holocaust studies, and I will compare how Holocaust scholars and writers deal with these issues and how they are addressed in the Syrian refugee literature. However, the objective of (Syrian) refugee literature differs from that of Holocaust literature. The refugee crisis is a current situation rather than a past horror, and its immediacy needs to be addressed socially, politically, and ethically in practical terms. Writers create empathy and develope understanding to build support from their readers for the plight of the refugees. The hope is that this empathy and understanding will change the ways readers treat *real* refugees in *real* life and, furthermore, perhaps inspire some political and social involvements. Despite these

differences, I believe that Holocaust scholarship can shed light on how traumatic experiences can be shared with children in ultimately positive and productive ways.

Additionally, when children or young adults are able to be agents in their own traumatic situations (for example, helping to free oneself or others from a collapsed building—a recurring image in the Syrian war literature) instead of passive victims of the circumstances, they retain or regain their sense of agency (Kolk 52). This is not to say that the experiences of war are not traumatic and leave the Syrian children and young adults without posttraumatic symptoms. However, as Bessel van der Kolk repeatedly stresses in *The Body Keeps the Score*, for children and young adults, the most traumatic experiences are of abuse at the hands of their caregivers, people who were supposed to nurture and love them (Kolk 123-124). Again, this does not minimize the traumatic experiences of the Syrian war refugees! But it does explain why these children and young adults within the literary works often show tremendous resiliency and agency in the face of horrible circumstances. Kolk's psychological theories help us understand why the love and care the young Syrians receive from their parents (and other family members, caregivers, and community) before, during, and after their traumatic experiences support them in developing agency and an ability to return to a sense of control.

STRUCTURE OF THE CHAPTERS

Since refugee stories so often follow a broad narrative of a difficult home situation, departure or journey, and then resettlement, I use this narrative structure in organizing the actual discussion of the children's and young adult books. Thus, Chapter

One examines books that primarily deal with the home situation, which forces protagonists' departure from Syria, and a subcategory of works about the Syrian war in which the characters do not leave Syria. I am including such works because they forcefully depict the situation as well as show internally displaced refugees.[2] This section focuses on those books that seem to emphasize the dire need of the home situation that eventually forces the protagonists to flee Syria. In terms of trauma and agency, I will investigate what the characters are doing to improve their wellbeing. What actions are they implementing to increase their agency? How is trauma affecting their daily life? How are the children and young adults supported by the grownups? What about their situation makes agency particularly important as a coping strategy?

---

[2] Novels intended for adult readers that also focus much of their attention on the home situation include *The Pianist of Yarmouk* by Aeham Ahmad (autobiographical), *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* by Christy Lefteri (fictional), *The Home That Was Our Country* by Alia Malek (autobiographical), *Syria's Secret Library* by Mike Thompson (biographical journalism), *My House in Damascus* by Diana Drake (autobiographical), and *The Crossing* by Samar Yazbek (autobiographical journalism). Additionally, *The Boy from Aleppo Who Painted the War*, written by Sumia Sukkar, details the tragic life of a family during the siege of Aleppo through the eyes of their fourteen-year-old, Asperger's son. Sukkar states in an interview that the novel was not intended for children ("Syrian Conflict Captured in Debut Novel by Kingston University Creative Writing Graduate" np), and I did not find any reviews from sources that promote children's or YA novels. Interestingly, the only scholarly discussion I found, however, is in *Terror and Counter-Terror in Contemporary British Children's Literature* by Blanka Grzegorczyk, who makes some salient observations about the war images used in the novel, the inability of the protagonists to properly mourn the loss of their loved ones (because they are bombarded by successive traumatic events), the collapse of the family, and the generative possibilities of art. I have found the novel, besides not being appropriate for young readers, to lack character development, complex protagonists, the voices to be unauthentic, the relentless succession of trauma desensitizing, and the ending rather unrealistic.

Chapter Two surveys aspects of the refugee journey. The focus is on the flight or escape out of Syria, often over land and sea, and crossing multiple countries.[3] Here the questions that surface are: How does the young people's agency lessen their trauma? What within this episode of the refugee experience supports and uplifts the children and young adults in the text? How are their roles and responsibilities different from their normal lives, before the war?

Chapter Three and Chapter Four analyze the refugee experience in exile—living in a refugee camp or resettlement in a host county. Most often in this stage the actual trauma has disappeared. The refugees are safe and not threatened by war. However, as mentioned before, the symptoms of trauma often do not simply disappear but are manifested in PTSD. How do the young people deal with their lingering trauma? What types of agency do they mobilize to help overcome PTSD? What factors interplay when the host country is hostile towards the refugees?

The Conclusions in Chapter Five bring the threads of the refugee experience in regards to agency and trauma together. Besides summarizing my findings, I end the

---

[3] Some of the notable adult works for this chapter are Aeham Ahmad's *The Pianist of Yarmouk* and Christy Lefteri's *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*. There is also a biographical work by Melissa Fleming, *A Hope More Powerful than the Sea: One Refugee's Story of Love, Loss, and Survival*, detailing the horrendous journey of Doaa Al Zamel, who stayed afloat for days in the sea on a tiny inflatable ring while holding onto a baby and a toddler, witnessing everyone else around her drown, including her fiancé. This work is particularly contentious since it is not written by Al Zamel herself, and she shared her story only after much convincing, and for the purpose of receiving asylum for herself and her family (*A Hope More Powerful*, "Author's Note" 269). Fleming's motivations were to help Al Zamel and her family receive asylum, work through her trauma, and also of "building bridges of empathy to the public" (*A Hope More Powerful*, "Author's Note" 263).

dissertation with further questions for research and hopefully with some inspiration for more analysis, for myself and others. My aim is to show the link between agency and trauma and how it is portrayed in the literature. Many of the works entail all three parts of the refugee experience, and I discuss them at times in all chapters. It is almost impossible to tell a refugee story without all of the narrative structure that is inherent in being a refugee—unbearable home situation, escape journey, and resettlement. Therefore, it is, with a few exceptions, no surprise that several works feature strongly in all my chapters of the dissertation. On a personal level, I am optimistic that researching and examining trauma studies, and analyzing and engaging with literature in which characters have endured similar experiences, has helped me heal my own wounds.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Syria has a long history of oppressive regimes and dictators. In the sixteenth century, Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire and remained under its rulers until its defeat in WWI when "the League of Nations carved these Arab areas into separate nation-states under British or French colonial control" (Pearlman xxxi). Syria was able to free itself and become its own state in 1946, only to be overpowered in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and lose some of its land. In 1963, after seven military coups between the years 1946 and 1963, another takeover placed the socialist Baath Party in control. Hafez al-Assad, part of the Alawite minority, was the "minister of defense and commander of the air force. In November 1970, he sidelined competitors and took power via a bloodless coup" (Pearlman xxxiii). Syria was under his grip from 1970 to 2000 when he died at 69

of a heart attack and then was replaced by his son, Bashar. Many Syrians welcomed Bashar al-Assad, hoping that he would lift some of his father's doctrines and initiate modern reforms and some democracy, calling the beginning of his era the "Damascus Spring" (Pearlman xxxvi). Unfortunately, Bashar al-Assad, like his father previously, fell into a pattern of autocratic rule, and the promised reforms quickly vanished, returning Syria to a dictatorship with a web of secret agents and police that controlled all aspects of life. I remember hearing as a child the common phrase "the walls have ears," which meant that one does not discuss politics anywhere, not even in the assumed safety of one's home.

Syrians under the Assad regimes have lived with the daily knowledge that any government opposition meant arrest, torture, or death. When the Middle East staged its Arab Spring and toppled dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, and beyond in 2010, most Syrians believed "that Syria—a 'kingdom of silence'—would be immune from the regional tide" (Pearlman xxxviii). However, when young teenagers wrote antiregime graffiti on their school wall in Daraa, they were arrested and tortured, their families humiliated, and the entire community insulted, leading to a slow but gradual uprising that started with small demonstrations in Daraa and like a wildfire spread throughout the country (Pearlman xxxix). While Bashar al-Assad has called the Syrian rebels terrorists, he "released hundreds of convicted Islamists, Salafists, and jihadists from jail in a cunning move that likely aimed to turn the rebellion into 'jihad' so that the regime could market itself on global political and media platforms as a participant in the 'war on terror'" (Saleh 184-185). Meanwhile, jihadists from neighboring countries, groups like al-Qaeda, infiltrated Syria and have contributed to the country's destruction and the killings of thousands of

people, leaving Syria fragmented and with certain areas controlled by primarily Assad forces or Daesh, also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Today, Syria suffers from famines, diseases, and a continuation of oppressive regimes (Assad or Islamist groups). As historian David W. Lesch explains, an estimated $300 billion" will be needed to reconstruct the country, and "about five hundred thousand Syrians have been killed in the war, with over half of the population either internally or externally displaced" (180). Furthermore, Syrians' life expectancy has dropped by twenty years and an estimated half of the children are not able to attend school, stifling the country's recovery and growth beyond education and literacy (Lesch 181).[4]

This is the setting of the autobiographies, (journalistic) biographies, fictionalized novels, graphic works, and pictures books that address the Syrian war. It is also the stage of the first chapter of this dissertation—Syrians' home situation that eventually forces the protagonists to flee their country, become displaced within their own nation, or to remain living there under horrible conditions. In terms of trauma and agency, I will investigate what the characters are doing to improve their wellbeing. What actions are they implementing to increase their agency? How is trauma affecting their daily lives? How are the children and young adults supported by the grownups? And what about their situation makes agency particularly important as a coping strategy? The theoretical framework for my analysis is, as mentioned earlier, trauma theory and some interdisciplinary approaches in regards to agency.

[4] For a thought-provoking perspective on how the population's complicity and the architectural development of certain areas have contributed to the war, see Marwa Al-Sabouni's book *The Battle for Home: A Vision of a Young Architect in Syria*.

Both trauma theory and interdisciplinary approaches to children's agency became major topics in the literary fields of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Additionally, trauma studies and agential approaches have strong connections to children's refugee literature, which was slowly developing at the same time, with works published after WWII.[5] Julia Hope in *Children's Literature About Refugees: A Catalyst in the Classroom* points to the development of the genre of refugee literature in Anglophone literature with its initial interest in European works (primarily WWII displacement) and recent developments within the last three decades of works including "stories set in locations as far afield [from her British homeland] as Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iran" (xi). Though Hope's interest is primarily in British refugee literature for children with an emphasis on using the works effectively in the classroom, she highlights the change within this genre from initial critical rejection of the works as not child appropriate with their "challenging subject matter" to being readily embraced in the children's canon of literary works (xii). Moreover, Hope also emphasizes the changes within the genre of refugee literature to works that are more agential either through first-hand accounts (autobiographical) or through authors writing "vicariously through encounters with those who have such histories" (xii). This change in perception to more agency, voice, and specificity can also be seen within trauma studies.

Trauma studies emerged in the 1990s with publications like Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* emphasizing psychoanalytical literary approaches with "the unspeakable void" as the "dominant concept in criticism for

[5] For more information on how refugee literature in general separated from postcolonial literatures, see Hadji Baraka's "Introduction: Refugee Literatures."

imagining trauma's function in literature" (Balaev 1).[6] However, as Michelle Baleav reminds us, newer models of trauma theory moved "away from the focus on trauma as unrepresentable and toward a focus on the specificity of trauma that locates meaning through a greater consideration of the social and cultural contexts of traumatic experience" (3). Furthermore, first generation trauma studies "remove[d] agency from the survivor by disregarding a survivor's knowledge of the experience and the self, which restricts trauma's variability and ignores the diverse values that change over time" (Balaev 6). My interest in trauma within this dissertation is also based on contemporary approaches and entails the representability as well as "the social and cultural contexts of traumatic experience," since I will focus specifically on the trauma embodied in the literature for children and young adults caused by the Syrian war. Besides, I am predominantly interested in how agency is assisting young people in coping with their trauma instead of becoming victims of their suffering. Also, agency has been not only a topic within children's literary studies but has been addressed interdisciplinary, so much so that David Oswell in *Agency of Children: From Family to Global Human Rights*, asserts, "The long twentieth century is, and has been, undoubtedly the age of children's agency. Children are not simply seen to be, but seen, heard, and felt to do. Children are not simply beings, they are more significantly doings" (3).

---

[6] For more information on the historical development of trauma studies see also the "Introduction" in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, edited by Buelens, Gert, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone and also the "Introduction" as well as the "Chapter 1" in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*. Also, see Alan Gibbs' work *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* for further criticism against Caruth and other traditional trauma studies, as well as suggestions for new conceptual models.

Oswell is primarily concerned with the agency (and power) that children have socially within institutions and within the field of sociology. What is interesting to me in regards to this dissertation is not so much his positive outlook on agency (though I do appreciate it), but rather the myths Oswell debunks: the myth of the individual child, the myth of identity and difference, the myth of divided, separated, and homogeneous space, the myth of scale, and the myth of the social agent. In the myth of the individual child, Oswell explains that children and adults do not exist "independently of others" but instead are connected to people and "different forms of materiality" (263). In the myth of identity and difference, he explains that the perceived differences between children and adults are culturally formed rather than universal structures (264-265). This perceived binary is also an extension of the myth of divided, separated, and homogeneous space, in which adult and children's spaces are viewed unconnectedly (267). In terms of scale of agency, Oswald proposes a perspective that "is defined through its multiscalarity and its multidimensionality instead of outdated ideas of micro and macro levels" (268-269). Lastly, Oswald stresses in the latter myth that the "facile reduction" of a binary concept does not take into account "counternarratives" and children within complicated life circumstances in interaction with others (269-270).

The connectedness of children and young adults to their parents, caregivers, and community at large is also the lens I am applying regarding agency as it is reflected in children's literature. This is a lens that includes in its perspective a positive attitude towards children and young adults with a focus on their capabilities, resourcefulness, resilience, and self-determination and also an optimistic viewpoint on children within their families and communities and their interactions with adults and the adult world. My

understandings of agency within children's and young adult literature rely heavily on the papers Marah Gubar and Richard Flynn published in *Jeunesse* after an annual conference hosted by the Children's Literature Association (ChLA) in 2014, in which Gubar and Flynn were part of a panel to discuss the topic of children's agency (Flynn "Introduction" 248). The panel was proposed by Perry Nodelman, after his email discussion with Richard Flynn in order to explore their differences in opinions and to clarify some of their positions.[7] What is at stake in the discussion is the foundational understanding of agency for children in general and also in particular within the field of children's and young adult literature. Nodelman and others, according to Flynn and Gubar, tend to focus on young people's alterity and inability to be agents, mostly in cultural production. In contrast, Flynn and Gubar focus on young people's connectedness and similarities to adults and explore ways children and young adults express their involvement in cultural production and agency with the literature.

Though Gubar does not provide explicit explanations on how to apply her model directly to the interpretation of works, I find her theoretical framework helpful as a foundation to viewing the Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults. However, Gubar does suggest that part of the model would be an increased interest in works written or performed by children and young adults, such as works of drama. Gubar, a professor of literature at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), proposes a kinship model that considers the interconnectedness of young people and adults and their individual agency irrespective of their age within the field of children's

[7] See Flynn's and Gubar's articles for a detailed discussion on the scholars' disagreements about the definition of children's agency.

literature and childhood studies. In her article "The Hermeneutics of Recuperation: What a Kinship-Model Approach to Children's Agency Could Do for Children's Literature and Childhood Studies," Gubar begins by positioning herself and her model within the framework of other scholars, such as cultural historian Karen Sánchez-Eppler, who "clears a path of children's literature critics interested in challenging the notion that children function solely as passive recipients of culture" with the purpose "to name and flesh out a model of childhood that is already implicit in their work" (291, 292). She ends her article by explaining what her approach could do for children's literature and childhood studies: "Even as the kinship model helps childhood studies scholars to make sense of our past, it gently nudges us to embrace an even more interdisciplinary future" (302). In other words, as Gubar stresses, "a philosophy of childhood informed by work that has already been done in childhood studies could function as a bridge between disciplines, providing us with a shared language that could help our field become as interdisciplinary as it aspires to be" (304-305). I approach of viewing agency and trauma through a literary (Caruth), historical (LaCapra), and psychological (Kolk) perspective also adds to the interdisciplinary scholarship of children's literature.

Gubar then juxtaposes her positive model against what she "dubs the 'deficit model' and the 'difference model'" ("Risky Business" 450). As the names suggest, the "deficit model" focuses on children's and young adults' inability to be agents in their lives, in their relationships to literature, and in their culture; the "difference model" assumes that young people are mostly different from adults. In contrast, then, Gubar's kinship model does not view children (or adults for that matter) as inherently deficient or different, and instead of concentrating on young people's alterity, she proposes to focus

on affinity. To Gubar, "Adhering to this model means maintaining that children and adults are fundamentally akin to one another, even if certain differences or deficiencies routinely attend certain parts of the aging process" (299). In regards to agency, the kinship model suggests a heterogenous and untidy position. Reminiscent of Flynn's argument that agency is not "synonymous with authority," Gubar states that "If we as scholars want to claim that children have agency, then, we must concede that the kind of agency they have is not synonymous with autonomy" (Flynn, "What Are We Talking about When We Talk about Agency" 257; Gubar, "The Hermeneutics of Recuperation" 293). Nevertheless, she stresses that adults do not have "autonomy" all the time either, and those adults, like children, live within an interdependent state. That is to say, there is nothing wrong with the fact that children require adults to help them through life, to teach them to master tasks and to develop competencies. Additionally, there is nothing wrong with the fact that young people's agency is based on their age, abilities, and circumstances. The same holds true for adults.

When viewing agency and trauma studies together, what surfaces is an over-emphasis on traumatization and not enough focus on agential choices. This perspective tends to keep refugees as victims, not allowing them agency and developing an (self) image of a survivor. Julia Hope, in her article "'One Day We Had to Run': The Development of the Refugee Identity in Children's Literature and Its Function in Education," stresses that the trauma narrative "of the refugee situation has dominated research to the extent that it has presumed a homogeneity amongst refugee children" (298). Hope, therefore, suggests agential works since they also speak to children's interest in demonstrating agency ("One Day" 296). She also emphasizes the need to use

refugee literature in the classroom in order to foster empathy for refugee classmates by the host students in addition to the need for refugee children to see themselves portrayed in literature ("One Day" 298).

Ekaterina Strekalova-Hughes, in her article "Unpacking Refugee Flight: Critical Content Analysis of Picturebooks Featuring Refugee Protagonists," concurs with Hope and adds another dimension to the connection of agency and trauma: she warns that if in the literature the deeper reasons behind refugee flight are mostly veiled as "institutionally irrelevant," children reading the literature assume that violence defines children from refugee backgrounds more than other experiences, cultures, or personal qualities (34). For Strekalova-Hughes, a focus only on empathy and sympathy (and no attention to agency and cultural values) "places the subject [refugee] in an inferior position" to his or her peers (33). Moreover, if the works do not demonstrate the actual reasons for the war, "causeless-conflict countries are contrasted with 'safe' places, like Europe and the United States," generating a dichotomy without informing the readers about the previous involvement of the "safe" places that might have added to the development of the war or that "safe" places likewise struggle with institutionalized injustices and could also become "unsafe" (Strekalova-Hughes 34-35). Thus, Strekalova-Hughes asserts that empathy might help current refugees trying to assimilate into their new host country, but a lack of political background in children's books "may do little to raise critically educated citizens who can prevent conflict in the first place" (36).

Hope's and Strekalova-Hughes' cautions return me to my initial argument that (Syrian) refugee literature for children and young adults needs a focus on agency to

empower the protagonists and to show the readers that these are not mere victims but individuals with a kaleidoscope of resources and abilities. These concepts are also supported through an astute sociological study, summarized in the article "Alternative Ways of Capturing the Legacies of Traumatic Events: A Literature Review of Agency of Children Living in Countries Affected by Political Violence and Armed Conflict." The three authors utilized a narrative review method to evaluate how "the construct of agency plays a crucial role in contributing to children's positive function and well-being despite their traumatic contexts [war and conflicts]" (Cavazzoni et al. 555). The authors found three categories: "agency within the personal level, agency as a relational notion, and agency as a cultural and context-specific concept" and then precise areas/ subcategories within them, such as education, family, and political involvement (559). Cavazzoni et al. assert that "these discrete categories were established to demonstrate that children's agency takes multiple forms and that its manifestation is strictly related to the system of norms, values, and beliefs of the given societal context in which the children live" (559). These categories reflect my models on agency and how the Syrian protagonists utilize different agential forms to cope with their trauma. Considering that the first chapter deals with the traumatizing home situation, I will, therefore, begin by analyzing some of these categories in a work that focuses specifically on a Syrian child stuck at home, trying to wrestle with his circumstances.

Tomorrow – An Exemplary Case:

Tomorrow is a picture book by Nadine Kaadan about a young boy, Yazan, who is struggling to understand how his life has changed due to the war. And like all the other

books about the Syrian protagonists that I will discuss, Kaadan's work is also a manifesto of how to make life bearable under intolerable circumstances. Yazan is no longer permitted to leave his home to go to the park, to play on the street in front of his house, to meet up with his friends, to ride his bicycle, or even to go to school. His parents too have ceased their regular activities. The mother used to paint for hours and now spends that time in front of the television watching the news.

> Yazan no longer went
> to the park, and he no
> longer saw his friend
> who lived next door //
> Everything around him
> was changing. //
> Even his mother
> had changed.
> She had stopped
> painting. (Kaadan, *Tomorrow* np)

This particular weekend, Yazan had tried to keep himself busy, but eventually overcome by his boredom, he leaves the apartment with his bicycle, only to find himself on a deserted street with explosions nearby. Frozen by fear and hesitation, Yazan stands still and is found by his father. To his utter surprise, the little boy is not punished or scolded by his parents. On the contrary, his mother greets him with open arms. Though she tells him adamantly not to leave without permission "ever EVER" again, it is apparent that her relief of finding him well is greater than her anger at Yazan's sneaky escape. She picks up her paintbrushes and goes to Yazan's room, where she draws a park on the walls, "an amazing park with everything you ever dreamed of." Although she is honest, in a response to a question by Yazan that she does not know when the war will be over, she promises him that he will "be able to go outside again and play." The last two pages are a

double spread depicting Yazan on his bicycle riding in an imaginary park in his room with a big smile on his face.

Tomorrow is an exception in the oeuvre of Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults since it does not show the characters as actual refugees. Yazan and his family are able to stay in their apartment since they live in the city of Damascus, which though parts came under heavy fire during the fighting, remained overall intact.[8] On the other hand, Yazan's situation is not exceptional because he experiences war trauma and uses agency to improve his situation. The trauma is not explicitly stated in the work but rather represented visually through illustrations, for example, showing Yazan in dark, empty rooms while displaying scared facial expressions or his mother in front of the television with the news spilling out resembling creepy monsters taking over the pages. Agency nevertheless is embodied not only in the visuals but also in the words; for

[8] Nadine Kaadan was inspired to write the story during a time when she was still living in Damascus and experienced the agony children felt of not being able to leave their homes to go play outside (*Tomorrow* endnote). Kaadan has since left Syria and is an expatriate in the United Kingdom. She explains in the endpaper of *Tomorrow* how her style of drawing has changed from "dreamy tones" to a "palette [that] became gloomy and dark." Kaadan not only depicts "Syria's rich cultural heritage" but also "committed [herself] to helping child refugees in Europe and the Middle East" (*Tomorrow* book cover). Her Anglophone works are published by Lantana, a publishing house whose motto is: "Because all children deserve to see themselves in the books they read" (cover page). The work was originally published in Arabic in Syria in 2012. Kaadan was inspired to write culturally appropriate works since when she grew up in the 1990s in Damascus, "very few children's stories or young-adult novels [were] written by Arabs" and portraying Arabic characters ("Syrian Author Nadine Kaadan" np). Her other Anglophone work *The Jasmine Sneeze*, published by Lantana in English in 2018 as well, portrays the author's love for her hometown with beautiful illustrations of a pre-war Syria filled with Damascus' architectural beauty, warm summer nights, and the all-encompassing smell of jasmine for which the city is known, and entails a lighthearted story of a cat (an animal regarded warmly by the citizens and found abundantly in the city) who struggles with the jasmine spirit.

instance, while Yazan ultimately sneaks out of the house, beforehand he does try very much to keep himself occupied. It is to his credit (and to the credit of his mother's parenting, which I will address next) that he "tries to keep himself busy" by drawing, "build[ing] a castle out of pillows," and making "142 paper planes." Following the categories Cavazzoni et al. offer, Yazan demonstrates "play as a creative way to adjust to the hard living conditions" and he receives family and "social support as a manifestation of agency" (559). Yazan thus employs several strategies to be an agent in his own life, to combat boredom, and to cope with his changed reality. And even the fact that he decides to leave—after telling his parents that he wants to go to the park and receiving a rejection—can be seen as a form of agency.

Yazan's parents are also not exceptional in regards to the love and treatment that Syrian youth encounter from their parents, caregivers, extended family, and community within the literary works. Even when Yazan's parents had been at times consumed with the realities of the war and less able to parent suitably, their love provides the stable foundation for their young son's life and actions. The notion of love as a foundation for agency (and many other things) is a significant concept in psychology. Bessel van der Kolk explains in *The Body Keeps the Score* that "children whose parents are reliable sources of comfort and strength have a lifetime advantage—a kind of buffer against the worst that fate can hand them" (112). This type of parenting is referred to as attachment style parenting and as Kolk states, "securely attached children learn what makes them feel good; they discover what makes them (and others) feel bad, and they acquire a sense of agency: that their actions can change how they feel and how others respond" (115). Furthermore, "securely attached kids learn the difference between situations they can

control and situations where they need help. They learn that they can plan an active role when faced with difficult situations" (Kolk 115). Yazan displays this type of attachment as well as its subsequent agency when he makes decisions to keep himself entertained, when he leaves the house but then realizes that he cannot go further (and is rescued by his father), and when he effortlessly exults in his mother's efforts to make life more bearable again.

The story portrays not only the importance of (parental) love in regards to agency and hope, but further addresses whose voice is listened to, who gets to have agency. Kaadan stresses in her work the need for a young child to be heard, to voice his wishes, and to be taken seriously. Moreover, her picture book can be seen as a meta-discourse about the authorial agency of the writer, for example, questioning who gets to write authentically about the Syrian war and which audience the narrator's voice is addressing, an issue I will consider in more detail when discussing Western writers that decided to write about the Syrian war. Kaadan is an award-winning author from Damascus, Syria, who now uses storytelling to "mitigate trauma in young refugees in places such as Lebanon" ("Kingston University" np). She has discovered that "storytelling in books can be very therapeutic for children; it helps them process their own emotions about their experiences and open up to others about them" ("Kingston University" np). When Kaadan asked children to draw their own feelings, the illustrations were filled with "bombs raining down and homes ablaze" ("Abu Dhabi International Book Fair" np). At the same time, as Kaadan emphasizes, the children also drew "clouds and birds in the sky, which is a sign of hope in their hearts" ("Abu Dhabi International Book Fair" np).

The importance of storytelling and writing one's own story as a means of agency to process trauma has been recognized by the psychiatric community for quite some time now.[9] Studies done by James Pennebaker and his team in the 1980s were empirically able to demonstrate the power of writing about one's trauma as a form of self-expression and coping strategy (Schäfer 62). Furthermore, as Jochen Paulus explains, how we manage to portray ourselves in our own narratives determined by our sense of self governs our perspective of the past, our sense of contentment in the present, and our ability to act in the future (20). An individual is able to (re)discover agency when trauma within one's life story is embedded cohesively (Paulus 20). In other words, finding one's agential resources in one's own life narratives frees up the person to move from being a victim to becoming a survivor with re-found agency. This "posttraumatic growth" enables the survivor, as Robert Muller in *Trauma and the Struggle to Open Up* explains, to "open new questions surrounding adaptation and change, who or what was lost, who or what is important in life. And a growthful [sic] telling can lead to new learning, for example, gaining greater clarity on core values, inner strength, and vulnerabilities" (25). However, as Muller stresses, this has nothing to do with "sugarcoating [traumatic events and feelings], getting people to look at the 'bright side' of their adversity," but rather a "process of self-reflection and reevaluation" that leads to agency and reconnection with

[9] An "exploratory study," the first of its kind, conducted with Syrian refugee children in 2019 demonstrates the positive outcomes of not only telling one's own story but using picture books to help the children cope with some of their anxiety and depression (Abi Zeid Daou 62). Reading the culturally relevant story book together as a family enabled the children to feel more connected to their parents, report less anxiety and depression, and feel more agential by thinking through solutions for the protagonists in the picture book.

others and the world (25). This distancing from so-called positive psychology is also underscored by Kolk in his interview with Cathy Caruth in *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience*, when he states that posttraumatic growth cannot be equated with merely thinking positive thoughts or expressing gratefulness for one's current (trauma free) life (161-162). At the same time, Kolk agrees with Caruth in the interview, that telling one's trauma story becomes enabling "because language at least gives you a voice and provides the possibility of being in touch with the rest of the human race" (163).[10] As a psychiatrist, Kolk emphasizes the need for appropriate medical treatment for trauma victims, but at the same time, he recognizes the power of language to open the path to reconnect with others and oneself.

Kolk's and Muller's caution not to trivialize traumatic experiences through positive psychology is related to questions brought up in trauma theory on how to represent trauma in art, especially for children. These questions evolved originally within Holocaust studies and involve queries such as the (im)possibility of child appropriate representations of the Shoah. Barry Stampfl explains in "Parsing the Unspeakable in the Context of Trauma" that though recent Holocaust studies have argued for the ability to represent the horrors of the Shoah, "the alleged unrepresentability of the traumatic event widely was accepted as a starting point of discussion, and has continued to be regarded as

---

[10] See Adrienne Kertzer's article "Cinderella's Stepsisters, Traumatic Memory, and Young People's Writing" for some challenges regarding Kolk and Caruth's assumptions about memory and for Kertzer's assertion that children's literature might be a good place for trauma work, an argument also to be found discussed in Kenneth B. Kidd's article, "'A' Is for Auschwitz: Psychoanalysis, Trauma Theory, and the 'Children's Literature of Atrocity.'"

an intellectual respectable position even by those who disagree with it" (15).[11] And even though, as Elizabeth Roberts Baer reminds us in "A New Algorithm in Evil: Children's Literature in a Post-Holocaust World," that "children's literature has a long tradition of wrestling with the question of presenting evil to children" from the Puritans' methods of scare tactics to the Victorians' "use of fantasy to sugarcoat their lessons about the dangers of the world," the "special evil" of the Holocaust demonstrated new problems of depiction (379). Baer criticizes several of the depictions herself, while calling to attention that the tenets of Holocaust studies state to "remember" and "never forget" (379). She then argues for "a set of criteria by which to measure the usefulness and effectiveness of children's texts in confronting the Holocaust sufficiently," such as a specific interaction with the horrors of the Shoah, for example, by accurately portraying the camps (384).[12]

---

[11] For more information on the development of trauma studies, as well as changes and trends in trauma theory, see: *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory* edited by Michelle Balaev; *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* edited by Jeffrey Alexander; *Contemporary Trauma Narratives* edited by Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau; and *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism* edited by Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone. For more information on the difficulty of Holocaust studies in art and education, see: Sarah D. Jordan's "Educating Without Overwhelming: Authorial Strategies in Children's Holocaust Literature"; Andrea Hammel's "Representations of Family in Autobiographical Texts of Child Refugees"; and Eva Lizzi's "Representations of the Shoah in Picture Books for Young Children: An Intercultural Comparison."

[12] Baer's arguments are supported by other major critics of the Holocaust literature, such as Hamida Bosmajian and Adrienne Kertzer. For Bosmajian, the problem is not simply "never to forget," but rather "*how* to remember" (xv). And Bosmajian also criticizes most works for children (and adults for that matter) depicting the Holocaust; unlike Baer though, she does not provide an explicit set of guidelines for an appropriate children's book on the Shoah. She does however provide clear differences in the depiction of the Holocaust between Germany and "North American youth literature," in which the former "narratives usually end with the main character feeling isolated, alienated, or in a state of profound ambivalence" versus the latter which stress the hero's "happy ending" (145). It is exactly this "happy ending" that is causing Bosmajian and other Holocaust scholars profound discomfort. Adrienne Kertzer's response to this discomfort is using Jane

Besides the need to find age-appropriate ways of depicting trauma in general, writings about the Holocaust and the Syrian war have other similarities. Both the Holocaust and the Syrian war address a time before, during, and usually after the trauma occurred. Also, the artistic expressions are typically created after the events have unfolded. This might seem like a banal comparison; however, considering the multi-media changes in the last fifty years, present-day war trauma is often depicted immediately in the news. On the other hand, the major difference between the two is not the immediacy of the traumatic representations (though that is a significant difference and one that I will focus on in more detail in other parts of the dissertation) but rather that the Syrian situation was a relatively recent event and is still happening today. The effects of the Syrian war continue to be seen not only in the country itself, but also in the lives of the Syrians still living the reality of being refugees. The Syrian refugees' motto is not about "remembering" or "never again," but about political awareness and a call for empathy. The protagonists' as well as the authors' aim is to make the readers aware of the sociopolitical situation and to foster compassion for the refugees so that they will be treated with more understanding and kindness in their host countries.

Though, the horrors of the Shoah might not be immediate, societies are still in need to be reminded of the past and to continue to protect all their members (Jews, Roma,

---

Yolen's novel *Briar Rose* as an appropriate tool that "simultaneously respects our need for hope and happy endings [it is a fairy tale], one in which the mass murder of millions of people did happen" explained through a "double narrative," since the author's note tells the readers about the true events (252). Nadine Kaadan uses a similar "double narrative" in *Tomorrow* and states in her "Author's Note" that "Almost a decade later, the situation continues to worsen for Syrian children, especially those who are living away from their homes and who have missed years of school. Today, we wait for a time when 'tomorrow' can be a better day for all Syrian children" (np).

people with special needs, and all others targeted by racial hate groups) as the existence of sustained fascism and the reemergence of Neo-Nazis show us. As Dorian Stuber and others discuss in his edited collection of essays, *Critical Insights*, Holocaust literature is now being written by the second and third generation of post-Shoah family members (and others), demonstrating that it has not lost its importance. Moreover, Stuber explains the connection between literature and the Holocaust, which I find also useful in explaining the need for Syrian refugee literature, addressing the representation of trauma:

> What literature brings to the study of the Holocaust is the recognition that mediation is central to experience. Its self-reflexivity makes Holocaust literature exemplary for the study of literature more generally—the questions it poses about representing extreme events pertains to representation writ large. Readers of Holocaust literature will learn about the Nazi attempt to murder Europe's Jews. But they will also learn what literature itself is and can do. In this sense, Holocaust literature is anything but blasphemy [an expression often used by the first generation of survivors]. Far from being a field of limited interest, however, moving and urgent, Holocaust literature forces us to grapple with the largest questions of representation itself. (xxxii-xxxiii)

Stuber makes it clear that the horror of the Holocaust is representable and that literature is one of its most substantial modes. Literary scholars also "grapple" with the connection of education and trauma, and how we can convey traumatic experiences through education. Shoshana Felman particularly struggles with these questions and refers to our modern times as not only "the age of testimony" [the first-generation accounts of the Holocaust survivors contributing to the coining of this term] but also "a post-traumatic century" that now has to interrogate our ways of conveying trauma studies in the class room (1). My answer is the inclusion of children's and young adult literature that address trauma. And for this particular dissertation, I would of course argue for the inclusion of Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults to foster empathy and to create understanding for

certain political realities and the human trauma of being a war refugee. Additionally, the importance of educating the young to political realities and to making readers more empathetic to the plight of others creates informed and kind humans, who then make better global citizens. Besides, as Gert Buelens and others contend in their "Introduction" to *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, there is a need for more inclusionary writings within trauma studies since "trauma theory has, to date, largely turned to elitist modern texts, it has been suspicious of popular genres" (7). This argument is supported by Roger Luckhurst's article "Future Shock: Science Fiction and the Trauma Paradigm" (in Buelens' collection), in which he claims that:

> . . . there have been prescriptive tendencies around what is considered to be an appropriate aesthetics for the representation of trauma. In short, trauma aesthetics has tended to favour Modernist tactics . . . and therefore been suspicious of the investment in narrative pleasure often equated with mass cultural forms like SF [science fiction]. (159)

The arguments presented by Buelens et al. and by Luckhurt add another dimension to the critics' arguments of age-appropriate presentation of trauma, specifically within Holocaust studies. However, here I would like to quote Kimberley Reynolds that "it is important to distinguish between simple and simplistic writing, for many apparently simple children's books say thought-provoking things with elegant, sometimes deceptive, simplicity" and some of them "are stylistically demanding for readers of any age or level" (26). This is also the case for *Tomorrow*, in which with simple language major concepts are conveyed—the destruction and changes the war brought to the characters, how the protagonists were changed by the trauma of the war, and also how they found ways to cope with the situation by finding their way back to each other emotionally and by (re)focusing on hope and agency.

CHAPTER ONE

HOME

"I dedicate my book to every child suffering in a war. You are not alone."

(Bana Alabed, *Dear World* np)

> You have to keep an eye out on the Internet in the hope that it won't be cut off, leaving this small patch of land isolated from the rest of the world as it faces utter annihilation. You also need to be aware of the most minute details and, most importantly, you must hold yourself together and stand strong when confronted with mutilated human body parts and the colossal destruction of homes, never forgetting, even for a moment, that your own collapse makes life harder for everyone around you.
>
> You simply have to walk up to tiny fingers and gather them up from under the rubble. Just pull out the body of another child, her clothes still warm from her urine. And then move on to the next site and carry on searching for more victims. You must forget the faces of the victims so that you can write about them later, so you can tell their stories and narrate to the outside world how their eyes shine as they watch the sky that showers them with barrel bomb sends deadly gifts.
>
> (Yazbek 143-144)

In the Introduction, I began the theoretical framework's discussion of the literary works with *Tomorrow* to set the stage for a Syria rattled by war and children trying to make sense of their changed lives. While the characters in *Tomorrow* remain at home in Syria, most of the Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults depicts characters that actually become either internally displaced or have to flee Syria altogether to find refuge, which is not surprising considering that over half of the population has been either internally or externally displaced (Lesch 180). In other words, after a decade of war, 13.5 million Syrians are refugees (UNHRC website np).

Saving Stella: A Dog's Dramatic Escape from War:

The picture book *Saving Stella: A Dog's Dramatic Escape from War* by Bassel Abou Fakher and Deborah Blumenthal and illustrated by Nadine Kaadan focuses powerfully on the circumstances leading up to the escape from Syria. It is the true story of nineteen-year-old Fakher, a musician from Damascus, who finds refuge in Belgium after his dangerous journey over land and sea. Six months later, with the help of multiple friends, he is able to get his dog, beloved Stella, out of Damascus and to Belgium to live with him. The picture book chronicles not only life before Fakher's escape, as well as his journey to Belgium, but also Stella's difficult life in his absence and her escape story. In "A Note from Bassel" at the end of the book, the author explains how anxious Stella was when she was finally reunited with him (np). Fakher also talks about her suffering and how though "she's getting better, if she sees Belgian soldiers in uniforms, she gets super traumatized. They remind her of the soldiers in Syria" ("A Note from Bassel" np).

The Syrian illustrator Nadine Kaadan experienced the loss of her cat, cherished Jarour, who "continues to be a source of inspiration in my stories and part of my memories of home," when her neighborhood in Damascus was bombed in 2013 ("A Note from Nadine" np). However, Kaadan is dealing with her trauma by utilizing agency effectively. She reads her books to children during her visits to refugee camps and displaced communities, and she uses her artistic voice to represent Syrians' resilience and humanity "during a time of naked prejudice, misrepresentation, and travel bans" ("A Note from Nadine"). Kaadan also informs the reader in her note that though she is able to travel in and out of Syria, and was able to simply "book a flight to London and leave"

when "staying safe had become too difficult," due to having a French as well as a Syrian passport, she is "deeply moved and distressed" by Bassel Abou Fakher's story. Kaadan's distress is beautifully illustrated in the picture book that pulls on the heartstrings of any empathetic person, but perhaps especially dog lovers. And since children tend to gravitate towards animals, this true story definitely speaks to young people.

In her review of the work, Lynn Christiansen asserts that "The picture book format makes the narrative accessible for younger readers, while the note from Bassel [and Kaadan] and background information [provided as the last double spread] about Syria enhance the knowledge of older readers" (92). The information section addresses the readers directly and makes it clear that the picture book is specifically for children, stating, for example, "More than half of the refugees in the world are children, just like you" (np). Christiansen continues to say, "Kaadan's soft illustrations do not shy away from the harsh reality of life in Syria or the pair's [separate] journey. However, the illustrations are not graphic or violent; they are mostly childlike and bright" (92). Yet, the softness of the illustrations troubles me, since the aspects depicting the horrors of refugees are portrayed too tenderly, for example, when Fakher crosses the Mediterranean or when he is "held in a refugee camp like a prisoner" for two months (*Saving Stella* np). In both of these double spreads, the colors are relatively light and though the protagonists and other characters look worried and sad respectively, neither the dinghy looks appropriately horrific nor the refugee camp sufficiently prison-like. Another troubling aspect of the book, as the *Kirkus Review* points out, is that the information section in the very back "unfortunately contains significant errors: saying that Turkey supports Assad and calling the Kurds (Syria's largest ethnic minority) a rebel group; moreover, it frames

the conflict as one waged against Assad by rebel groups with different agendas and elides the role of civilian resistance to an authoritarian government" ("Saving Stella"). This misinformation is also stated within the work by the simplified statement that "rebel groups wanted a new leader, but the president refused to leave," which does not do justice to the actual reasons the war started or its development (*Saving Stella* np). I am not sure what the writers and editors' intentions are in portraying the Syrian war in such a way; my only guess would be that they wanted to simplify a complicated history and sectarian divisions. It is sometimes difficult to avow facts and truths; however, according to sources such as historian David Lesch, journalist Wendy Pearlman, and Syrian writer Yassin Al-Haj Saleh (only to name a few), the *Kirkus Review* is correct in its reproach.

On the other hand, the information section in *Saving Stella* provides valuable suggestions that children (and adults) can use to help refugees in very practical ways, such as donations to refugee organizations, welcoming new classmates, and offering more political agendas to "urge your parents to cast their ballots for candidates who support assisting refugees around the globe, not politicians who turn their backs on them" (*Saving Stella*). In terms of agency and trauma, it becomes apparent that once Fakher finds the courage (and help) to get Stella out of Syria, he and the dog are much happier. Fakher's agential actions bring him his beloved Stella back and increase his quality of life, and like Stella, Bassel Abou Fakher "has two lives. Then. And now. One is lost. And one is found" (*Saving Stella*).

The Cat Man of Aleppo and *The Little War Cat*:

Two other picture books aimed at younger readers portray the life of the internally displaced Syrians with one real life character in common, Mohammad Alaa Aljaleel, also known as the "Cat Man of Aleppo." One book is written by Irene Latham and Karim Shamsi-Basha and illustrated by Yuko Shimizu and is titled *The Cat Man of Aleppo*, while the other is *The Little War Cat* by Hiba Noor Khan and illustrated by Laura Chamberlain. Both works were published in 2020, the former with Penguin Random House in New York and the latter in London by Macmillan. I point this out since neither of the works refers to the other, and I am not sure they were aware of each other upon publication, which would explain that though both picture books portray Mohammad Alaa Aljaleel's true story, this is where their resemblances cease.

The Cat Man of Aleppo begins with an introductory note by Aljaleel, printed in Arabic on the left page and in English on the right, in which he states that the book "is a story about cats and war and people. But most of all, it is a story about love" (np). And love is the theme on the next double spread as well. The reader is told in third person that Alaa "loves his city of Aleppo…. he loves the people of Aleppo. They are gentle, polite, and loving—like him." Aljaleel is situated in a bazaar buying items, while behind him the hustle and bustle of the bazaar is tenderly depicted with people shopping and children running around and petting cats. Then a trio of spreads illustrates the destruction of Aleppo and Aljaleel in his role as an ambulance driver carrying people out of the wreckage as well as his despair as his neighborhood empties out, leaving behind mainly hungry and traumatized cats. In the next double spread, a gigantic olive tree towers over

Aljaleel with two cats sitting in the branches; the reader is told that his "heart swells with love for them. Bombs may still fall, and his loved ones may never come back to Aleppo. But there is something he can do: he can look after the cats." He begins to feed the cats, and as their numbers grow, he solicits the remaining neighbors' help, depicted as predominantly children. Then, over the course of six double spreads, readers see Aljaleel's efforts become a viral sensation, and he receives donations "from many different countries," "volunteers arrive," and he is able to build a sanctuary, "rescue other animals," build "a playground for the children still living in Aleppo," and distribute food to "the people he meets." The picture book ends with a euphoric Aljaleel looking up a tree (and presumably into the reader's face) and smiling so hard that his eyes are squinted, surrounded by cats and with some of them draped over his shoulders. The readers are once again told about Alaa's love for the cats and how the love "multiplied" and how he continues to love "his city of Aleppo" while hoping that "one day soon its bazaars selling pistachios and jasmine soup will return." The final double spread contains the author's as well as the illustrator's notes telling their reasons for creating the book, ways to help, their well wishes, and their hopes for Alaa, his sanctuary, Aleppo, and Syria at large.

This lovingly (pun intended) illustrated picture book, through ink, digital artworks, and watercolor, emphasizes hope, love, and kindness to all sentient beings. Aljaleel's connection to the animals and children has an almost folkloric and magical component, portraying him as a figure larger than life. On the other hand, the detailed and individualistic representation of all characters makes the work convincing and lifelike. The illustrator states in her note that "the characters in the illustrations are composites of

multiple Syrian people from reference photos I gathered," making them recognizable, modern Middle Easterners and not stereotypes or caricatures (np). The redemptive narrative and the optimistic ending are balanced with the explicitly stated reality that Aleppo has not returned to its prior beauty and normalcy. Additionally, the trauma inflicted by the war is still visible in the surrounding rubble, and the people have to give up their cats as they continue to leave the city. Agency, however, is a significant component in this autobiographical story, not only for Aljaleel who decides to remain and help his community, but also for the remaining children (and adults) who decide to support him in his efforts to take care of the animals. The children's ability to care for and support the animals can be explained by Kolk's research that "having a safe haven [the children's families and community prior to the war] promotes self-reliance and instills a sense of sympathy and helpfulness to others in distress" (113). The "safe haven" is clearly depicted not only in the images prior to the war, but also in the way the children relate to the adults, such as Aljaleel, during the war. The children are affectionate, smiling, comfortable with the adults and the animals, and supportive of their community, lovingly feeding and caressing the animals—and all ostensibly by their own agential choice.

Love for other sentient beings is also the theme in *The Little War Cat*, the story of a "little gray cat who lived" a seemingly happy life "in Aleppo," basking "beneath the palm trees" and "play[ing] tag in the marble mosques" until the war robbed her of friends, safety, and food (np). The emotive artwork shows the beauty of Aleppo before the war and then the scared and emaciated cat wandering through a darker devasted landscape of boarded up buildings and destroyed streets, until one day the cat notices a

"human [who] had a gentle voice and spoke kind words," which of course the reader recognizes as Aljaleel, working as an ambulance driver. The cat follows him "past empty houses and broken furniture," all the way to his remarkable sanctuary where, too shy to join, she sits in a corner until Aljaleel brings "her fish to eat, and stayed with her all night long." The next day, the cat spots "under a table, a trembling shadow, a small blue shoe" and realizes that it is a human child who is in the situation she had been in recently. So, the cat comforts the boy with food, purring, and "warming his cold hands," and the reader is told that "slowly but surely, the magic that worked on the little gray cat . . . worked on the little boy too."

The picture book begins with a double spread of the little gray cat leisurely sunbathing in front of a mosque and gently pawing at a butterfly and ends with a similar image—that of the half-reclined boy and the cat gently pawing a tiny blue ball in Aljaleel's courtyard. The illustrator tenderly depicts Aleppo, its people, and animals as well as the suffering of a devastated city with its anguished human faces and the pain of loss. However, Khan does not provide much contextual information for the reader about Aljaleel within the actual picture book, besides the illustrator's placement of an ambulance in the distance within one of the double spreads. Khan offers a bit of information about Aljaleel in her note at the end of the work, but her focus is definitely on kindness and making a difference in the world instead of the real person on which the story is based. She tells the readers that "After working to help war victims and visiting refugee camps, I saw for myself how homes and loved ones are lost, but hope never is" (np). Khan continues to say that "A little kindness goes a long way. As we see from the story, there is a ripple effect, spreading to many people, animals and places." She then

directly addresses the audience and asks, “Can you think of ways you can be kind?” She answers her own question by suggesting, “It could be as simple as saying something nice, lending a helping hand or even just smiling at someone!”

These outwardly lofty ideas of hope and empathy, and deep human connections, are actually seated in the reality Khan experienced while volunteering at the Turkish border to help distribute food and hygiene boxes (*Yes!* 70). It is there that Khan’s Syrian guide, who despite having lost many loved ones, continued to hold on to hope “and became a beacon of light for others” (*Yes!* 71). When Khan heard about “the cat man of Aleppo,” she was reminded of her Syrian guide and decided to write her book. Also, Khan herself comes from a diasporic background since her parents are of Pakistani origin, and she is a first-generation Brit. Moreover, Khan had worked “as a Refugee Advocate” and therefore she was keenly aware of discrimination and “lack of social mobility,” and the “relentless media and political scapegoating of refugees fueled by societal vitriol, and our national empathy deficit was capitalized on for the Brexit campaign” (*Yes!* 71).

Khan’s words reflect the idea that empathy for the plight of the refugees is one of the leading motivations for authors to write about the Syrian war and its terrible consequences. Though *The Little War Cat* is written in third-person limited from the cat’s perspective, the reader still feels greatly compelled by the anthropomorphized issues the cat experiences and how they are similar to the young boy’s trauma. Besides, when the cat takes the initiative to nourish the boy’s body as well as his heart, her happiness increases. The message is clear: increasing another sentient being’s happiness leads to

one's own contentment and reveals that we are all connected with each other, that our sorrow mirrors that of others, and that we can help uplift each other. As Kolk tells us, "Numerous studies of disaster response around the globe have shown that social support is the most powerful protection against becoming overwhelmed by stress and trauma" (81). Kolk further explains that "Our attachment bonds are our greatest protection against threat" and that "Recovery from trauma involves (re)connecting with our fellow human beings," or in this case, I would argue, with our fellow sentient beings (212). Both the cat and the little boy are able to trust once more and return to some sort of normalcy again when they (re)connect with another being. Of course, we do not know what happens to the little boy, but the implied expectation here is that the actions of the cat may also inspire him to demonstrate agency and connect further with others, perhaps helping another person or animal traumatized from the war to find hope once more and to (re)connect with a loving being and, therefore, repeating and continuing the cycle.

Dear World: A Syrian Girl's Story of War and Plea for Peace:

The autobiographical work *Dear World: A Syrian Girl's Story of War and Plea for Peace*, written by the then eight-year-old Bana Alabed and her mother, set primarily in Aleppo during the siege by Assad's forces, is also motivated by a call for empathy and support. Alabad and her family spent four years in a besieged Aleppo and were only able to flee to Turkey once the siege was lifted. Alabed and her mother take turns telling the reader about their difficult situation, and as the Author's Note tells us, the purpose of the work is to inspire readers to "want to help people," presumably people like Alabed and her family (np). Alabed and her mother's trauma manifest in dreams (PTSD symptoms)

of recurrent nightmares in which they are buried under rubble (119). The younger brother exhibits other typical symptoms such as bed wetting and delay of language acquisition (100, 133).

However, through all the bombs, the hunger, and the losses, Alabed and her family choose to be kind, to support others, to attend school whenever possible, to see beauty in the world, and even to use humor. All these choices are expressions of agency, of a determination to live a semi-normal life in the midst of chaos. And as Alabed's mother states about Bana, "You have learned to nurture optimism and a sense of resilience, without which you would have given up … or give in to despair" (*Dear World* 59). Unquestionably though, Alabed lost hope at times, and being the big sister to her two little brothers became on occasion burdensome. When the family's apartment was destroyed and they fled with the bare minimum to another section of Aleppo, Alabed gave in to despair. Feeling ill as well as hungry and thirsty, she states, "I was too tired to have hope anymore. I was tired of fighting to stay alive. I thought it might be easier if a bomb came down on us and we didn't have to live like this anymore" (172).

Alabed had started tweeting about her circumstances during the siege, expressing *her voice* explicitly, sharing *her truth* about the war with "nearly 370, 000 followers" and asking the world for help (*CNN Wire*). Dubbed by the media as "our era's Anne Frank of the Syrian civil war" with the distinctive "difference being that she was showing horrors in grim real-time," Alabed tweeted pleas for peace and rescue, as well as pictures of her destroyed home and the overall devastation of Aleppo (Taylor np). As Byoni Trezine notes in her article "Minor Representations: From Anne Frank to Bana Alabed – The

Radically Performative Literacies of a Viral Child," Alabed is a viral child "whose highly public capacity for a form of indeterminable self-agency performs a rupture at the core of how modern childhood has been conventionally understood" (116). Trezine discusses in some detail the history of the social construction of the child and childhood. She also compares the similarities as well as the differences between Anne Frank's diary form and Bana Alabed's digital representation of herself, focusing on how social media has changed and affected the evolution of the girl war diary ("Minor Representations" 127).

Trezine concludes that "The viral child in this way not only produces new literatures that are conceived by cross-platform media, but also performs itself as a subject who is accomplished in wielding – as well as weaponizing – viral literacies that have material, tangible effects on present outcomes" ("Minor Representations" 130-131). These "outcomes" materialized for Alabed in several forms, particularly in emotional support via Twitter messages, and moreover in the actual support from Turkey, leading to the evacuation of civilians as well as the acceptance of Alabed and her family by the Turkish government. Alabed specifically articulates how the world's responses to her tweets made her feel cared for and "made us feel better" (148). She was drawing strength from the emotional support of strangers and hope that the world might be able to find a way to end the siege, and maybe even the war (149). Trezine's work builds on two other scholars, Ana Belén Martínez García and Kate Douglas, each of whom published an article on Bana Alabed and Anne Frank in the context of girl war diaries ("Minor Representations" 116). García's assumptions about Alabed's and her mother's role in the tweets are rather negative, claiming that Alabed's mother is using her daughter as a "soft weapon" for "gaining asylum, refugee status, and later citizenship from Turkey" (138,

145). And though García concedes that Alabed's contradictory tweets (ranging from calls for peace to asking for military intervention) could be attributed to "human nature and its inconsistencies," she continues to see Alabed's role as an activist rather critically (142).

In contrast, Kate Douglas' conclusions are more open minded and framed as questions to ponder rather than assumptions about Alabed and her family's motives. Douglas also views the possibility that Alabed's parents use her as a "soft weapon," but she settles with the prospect that Alabed "claims a space for her own narrative within public discourse" ("@Alabedbana" 1033, 1035). Likewise, Douglas acknowledges Alabed's role as embodying Aleppo's "collective, communal trauma," and she acknowledges that "Collaboration between al-Abed [Bana Alabed] and her mother does not necessarily diminish the possibility that this is a child-authored life narrative text" ("@Alabedbana" 1026, 1030). Douglas ends her article with a discussion of agency and admits, "Perhaps the questions that remain, and these are so often the questions that remain in discussions about children's life writing, are about agency and mediation" ("@Alabedbana"1035). It is interesting to me how these two scholars—García and Trezine—tend to underestimate a child's ability to communicate, to express *her* voice, and how some parental mediation is suspiciously regarded, especially considering that both Bana Alabed and her mother clearly state whose voice is speaking in the tweets as well as in the book.

Another scholar who regards Bana Alabed and her mother's mediation critically is Chelsey Hauge, who in "Girl with a Voice: Bana Alabed's Digital Engagement and Democratic Practice" additionally warns about "the defeating narratives of agency that

set up the individual subject as the defining impetus for change" (704). However, I would argue that exactly this individual agency is what has provided Alabed some relief from her personal trauma. Through her voice—in media as well as in literature—she has managed to vocalize her trauma and form connections to others. Judith Lewis Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* stresses that after establishing safety, the second and third steps for the survivor are to "reclaim her own history" and to restore social connections (195). Bana Alabed continues to be a peace activist even after resettlement in Turkey (Taylor 1). This social and political activism is what the psychologist Judith Lewis Herman has deemed as one of the best strategies to "transform the meaning of their [the survivors'] personal tragedy" by "transcend[ing] it" and "by making it a gift to others" (207). This idea is also expressed by Bana Alabed's mother:

> We must continue to speak out on behalf of innocent Syrians and other people affected by war. We understand what is at stake and just how hideous war is, so if not us, then who? We lived, and our debt and our duty for that miracle is to help others to live. (*Dear World* 198-199)

At twelve years of age, Bana Alabed published an autobiographical picture book in 2021 titled *My Name Is Bana*, continuing her focus on strength and agency. Written in first person, the story starts with Alabed cuddled up in her mother's lap in an armchair asking about the meaning of her name. The mother explains in the next two double spreads that Alabed was named after a native tree from Syria, symbolizing her strength. When Alabed asks further for her mother to define what it means to be strong, the readers receive four successive double spreads of explanations stating, "you are brave even when you are scared," you provide strength for people to "lean on you," you nurture your mind and body with reading and athletic activities such as running, and "you use *your mighty voice*

to speak when you see something that is wrong or unfair" (*My Name Is Bana*, emphasis mine, np). Then, "when war came" to Alabed's country, she discovers how strong she is and has to be: "I had to be very brave even though it was loud and scary and we always had to hide." Moreover, Alabed comforts her two younger brothers and improvises a playground in the living room to distract them all from the war raging outside their apartment. The work ends with several pages depicting Alabed leaving on an airplane and starting life somewhere new, making friends, speaking in front of "adults to remind them that all children should be safe," and spending time with her family in nature.

The leitmotif of Bana Alabed's strength is juxtaposed in the Author's Note which states that "kids shouldn't have to always be so strong. Every child deserves to live in peace" (*My Name Is Bana* np). She also contextualizes her picture book, explaining such topics as how the war (though without providing the political reasons for it) changed her life, her tweets on Twitter and the subsequent international support, the escape from Syria, how she lives with her family in Turkey now, and her role as a human rights activist. What is striking in this picture book and its beautiful, soft illustrations focusing on the protagonists' faces—is the apparent, intimate connection between Alabed and her mother. As Linda Annable states in her book review, "their love is apparent on every page" (99). Additionally, what is apparent is the focus on agency. Here again, as in Alabed's previous work *Dear World*, the focus is on agential choices that improve the protagonists' lives in their traumatic circumstances. Following the categories Cavazzoni et al. offer, we can read as well as see in the illustrations that Alabed and her family demonstrate agential choices in all three groupings: personal, relational, and cultural. The picture book stresses the importance of education, sport activities, familial support, and

religion (Alabed's mother is wearing a headscarf). Likewise, the children's Arabic names are culturally specific and are meant to be empowering. Additionally, the book emphasizes continued focus on collective civic engagement through peace activism. Similarly, viewing the work through Flynn and Gubar's ideas of child agency—a focus on children's capabilities and kinship to adults—Alabed and her mother's connection (and the overall love exhibited within the family) is seen as a source not only of support but also of agency.

Butterfly: From Refugee to Olympian—My Story of Rescue, Hope, and Triumph and *The Girl from Aleppo: Nujeen's Escape from War to Freedom*:

Two other autobiographical works that discuss the home situation in more detail are Yusra Mardini's *Butterfly: From Refugee to Olympian—My Story of Rescue, Hope, and Triumph* (her co-writer is Josie Le Blond) and Nujeen Mustafa's *The Girl from Aleppo: Nujeen's Escape from War to Freedom* (her co-writer is Christina Lamb). However, the teenagers' situations in Syria prior to the war could not be more different. Mardini comes from a well-respected, middle-class Syrian family with a father who trained her and her sister to become competitive swimmers. In contrast, Mustafa's circumstances in Syria were difficult even prior to the onset of the war since she and her family are Kurdish, an ethnic minority that suffered much discrimination in Syria. Furthermore, Mustafa has cerebral palsy, a condition that kept her stuck almost entirely in the family's small apartment since the Syrian government did not (and of course still does not) provide many services for people with disabilities. What the two girls have in common, though, is their highly publicized escapes from Syria to Germany, which I will

address in the next chapter. Mustafa spent most of the journey in a wheelchair and receives assistance from her sister, extended family members, and strangers. Mardini also fled with her older sister Sara (and others), and when they found themselves capsizing in a little dinghy on their sea crossing from Turkey to Greece, the sisters jumped into the water and managed for three hours to keep the boat afloat and moving in the right direction. Moreover, both Mardini and Mustafa received much support in Germany, the former as an athlete and the latter as a person with disabilities who needed physical therapy and adaptive equipment, like a motorized wheelchair, to become more independent, which I will address in more detail in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

Though both teenagers initially reject the label of a refugee with its negative connotations, Mardini and Mustafa manage through their social and political activism to find their voice and ultimately transcend the refugee stigma of neediness and shame. Also, as Alberta Natasia Adji reminds us in "Youth Matters: Shedding Light on Displacement in Syrian Girls' Memoirs," though both "their changing identities… reflect the uncertainty of the current geopolitical situation [of refugees]," Mustafa and Mardini "reclaim their voice and agency" by sharing not only their stories but also challenging refugee stereotypes (237). Mardini became a member of the Olympic Refugee Team in 2016, and empowered in her new position as a spokesperson for refugees has since used the Olympic games with their publicity as a platform to speak for herself and others. Mustafa, an ambassador for refugee youth, advocates especially for refugees with disabilities, a group often forgotten or ignored (Adji 237). With the caution in mind not to perpetuate the neoliberal ideology of the individual's responsibility, I would still like to stress that Mustafa and Mardini's choices (for example, to leave Syria in the first place

and their interactions with others during their escape)—in other words their agency—helped them overcome not only their circumstances but also some of their trauma. In addition, both teenagers were aware of their social limitations that would have restricted them in a continued life in Syria. Mardini discusses in her memoir the lack of a future for female swimmers in Syria and, therefore, her decision to flee to Germany (*Butterfly* 12, 13, 65). Mustafa writes in her memoir how she harbors the hope to find a marriage of love in her new life in Germany instead of the culturally prescribed arranged marriages of her somewhat strict religious Muslim family (*The Girl from Aleppo* 246). Also, Mustafa details her restrictive life in Syria, considering the family had little income and the government does not provide much assistance for people with special needs. Nevertheless, considering the devastating effects of the Syrian war on Mardini and Mustafa, their country, and the millions of Syrian refugees, the question of a redemptive narrative, despite all efforts to use positive lenses such as agency and kinship models in my analysis of the literature, remains.

Mustafa not only writes about the revolution, but also about her and her family's life as Kurds in Syria prior to the war. She echoes my earlier assertion, that politics were not discussed, even with the family: "We never talked about Assad, even at home between ourselves. We knew they have agents everywhere. The walls have ears, we used to say, so don't talk" (*The Girl from Aleppo* 31). She is fond of numbers and statistics and interweaves them throughout her story, for example, when she states, "Did you know that one in every 113 people in the world today are refugees or displaced from their homes?" (12). She also details the history of her people, "the world's biggest stateless tribe," and explains their circumstances in the different countries such as Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and of

course Syria (15). What is striking from the beginning of Mustafa's narrative is her sense of humor and slight sarcasm, for example, her musings about Assad's family and their insecurities (29). However, Mustafa's greatest weapon is her sharp intellect and her witty insights, helping her tolerate a life reduced to the walls of her family's apartment and an infantilized treatment from others typical for children (and adults) with disabilities. Another resource is her desire for knowledge and education. She teaches herself English by watching American soaps and during their escape becomes the family's translator, trading her role from the dependent child to the most valuable asset of the family.

Yusra Mardini's life before the revolution, as previously stated, was more ordinary in comparison to Mustafa's. Mardini was a typical teenager, who due to her privileged position—living in a religiously moderate Sunni family with middle-class means which allowed her training to be a competitive swimmer—is able to be apolitical. The family are not exactly Assad supporters, but their lives are comfortable under the regime, and therefore Mardini's father is incredulous that the Arab Spring will happen in Syria: "Syria is stable and sensible, he tells us. The people are calm and quiet. They won't make any problems. Everyone has a job, life is good, we're working, happy, getting on with our lives" (*Butterfly* 23). Obviously, he is proven wrong, and too many unhappy Syrians rise to join the Arab Spring. Unlike Mustafa, Mardini does not truly exercise her agency until the escape. The war pushes her to make decisions formerly unthinkable, such as seeking refuge in Germany. Until the revolution started, Mardini had not directly suffered under Assad's dictatorship; she was not interested in his regime of terror, but instead she was ruled by her father's wish for her to become a competitive swimmer: "I am his daughter. And I'll swim whether I like it or not" (*Butterfly* 8). It is

interesting to note that Mardini's older sister, Sara, is actually the one who stages a teenage rebellion against the father's authority: after multiple injuries, she decides to quit swimming. Sara's and Yusra's lives become very separate, and their decisions will remain distinct from each other even after they resettle in Germany. What both Mardini girls have in common with Mustafa is also their ability to speak English. However, their education was strongly supported by their family, and the mother employed private tutors to educate her daughters. Like Mustafa, Yusra Mardini's English speaking skills help her not only during the escape but also in her subsequent life as a refugee ambassador, supporting her (international) voice express herself and represent the plight of others.

Escape from Syria and *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees*:

Two books that address the home situation are graphic novels: *Escape from Syria* by Samya Kullab, published in 2017, and *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees* by Don Brown, published a year later, both works also focus on escape and resettlement issues, and I will refer to the works in the subsequent chapters when appropriate.[1] Both works provide much background information in the postscript about the Syrian conflict as well as graphs, statistics, and historical data, and some facts throughout the works. The biggest difference between the two works is the narrator's perspective. In Brown's novel, the characters remain nameless, and several stories are intertwined to demonstrate aspects

[1] These two works are the only graphic novels I found specifically marketed for young adults that address the Syrian refugee situation. Most other graphic novels have been marketed as graphic journalism for adult audiences, such as *Threads from The Refugee Crisis* by Kate Evans and *Escaping Wars and Waves: Encounters with Syrian Refugees* by Olivier Kugler, or wartime memoirs with haunting drawings such as *Brothers of the Gun: A Memoir of the Syrian War* by Marwan Hisham, illustrated by Molly Crabapple.

of war experiences such as being arrested for protesting peacefully or managing life in a horrible refugee camp. Brown purposefully decided not to interview refugees, stating that "The notion of having refugees recount their awful experiences of exodus seemed unnecessary and cruel. After all, those horrible stories are already widely circulated" (93). Nonetheless, he uses direct quotes from sources such as interviews recorded in articles published in the *Guardian* or *The New York Times*, which he meticulously documents. In contrast, Kullab's novel is written in first person by a young female teenager. Kullab portrays the protagonist's as well as her family's issues with considerable nuance and without much sentimentality.

Set in Toronto, Canada, in 2017, *Escape from Syria* is about Amina, a young Syrian girl who, through a combination of flashbacks and an embedded narrative, reflects on her family's escape from Aleppo in 2013, their difficult life in a Lebanese refugee camp, and their resettlement in Canada. Prior to the war, she was a bright student who after school enjoyed reading books at the home of her uncle, a professor. The family's home is destroyed in a bomb explosion, shown on the second double spread and catapulting the narrative immediately into the story's action, and the four family members leave for Lebanon with a few meager possessions, at first to an apartment until their savings run out and then to a refugee camp. Amina is initially lucky to have a spot in the overcrowded school, but when her brother becomes ill with bacterial meningitis and requires expensive medication, she has to quit her education and start backbreaking work in agricultural fields to help support the family. The father makes a deal with smugglers to help him escape with the goal to apply for a family reunification once his asylum in the host country is approved. Instead, he finds himself nearly drowned,

indebted to the criminal smugglers, and fearing for his safety. Amina visits the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) in her Lebanese camp to collect the family's allotted assistance and shares her family's story with one of the aides, who unbeknownst to her files for the family's resettlement to protect them from the loan sharks.

Kullab's graphic novel begins with an "Introduction" that informs the reader of her connection to the Syrian conflict. The writer, a former reporter of the English-language Lebanese newspaper, the *Daily Star*, created Amina as the embodiment of the Syrian youth she had met. Kullab also provides some background information on the Syrian war, the refugee crisis in the neighboring countries, and the difficulties in resettlement (*Escape from Syria* 4-5). This information is supplemented by back matter with "Endnotes," including actual photographs of the war and its destruction that put specific moments of the story within a sociopolitical and historical context. The composite character of Amina has drawn some criticism from reviewers such as Natalie Colaiacovo, who "would've liked to learn more about Amina's inner life and individual perspective on her circumstances" (31). Ardo Omer, mirroring these sentiments, finds that "Kullab doesn't provide an in-depth look into who these characters are outside of their refugee experience" (47). However, Omer praises how the illustrations "add intensity and solidify the strong emotional engagement Kullab creates" (47). And Matisse Mozer's appreciation extends to placing *Escape from Syria* "In league with Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persopolis*," making Kullab's work "a must-purchase for any teen or adult graphic novel collection" (114).

Endorsed by library critics for ages twelve and up and recommended for school classrooms, the work shines in its moments of great horror as well as quiet pain, depicted age appropriately though the illustrations do not shy away from the war's cruelties and difficult refugee life, causing Colaiacovo to warn against "younger or sensitive students picking up this text" (31). Moreover, the novel addresses themes rarely mentioned in other Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults. One of these is child marriage, a custom not entirely foreign to Syria prior to the war, which escalated during the refugee crisis with families trying to protect their daughters from sexual harassment in the refugee camps (*Escape from Syria*, "Endnotes" 94). Young girls, often under the age of ten, endured mental as well as physical trauma from the wedding night and subsequent childbirth (*Escape from Syria*, "Endnotes" 94). In addition, Kallub does not shrink from a more complicated portrayal of some of the characters and their relationships. Amina, whose perspective is foregrounded as the first-person narrator, portrays her mother as unreasonably protective and old-fashioned, for example, when the mother demands that Amina not linger in front of their container-tent or when she fusses over their meager meals. However, as readers, we can visually perceive that the mother's caution is warranted since Amina is the only female outside of the container-tents, and that it is normal for a mother who justifiably prides herself on her former delicious meals to want to provide adequate food for her family.

Yet, Kullab likewise reveals some of the noteworthy aspects within Amina's life that signify the power of agency to deal with trauma, such as the love and care within the family and the recognized needs of its individual members. Amina's parents not only recognize her intellect and support her studies during their normal life prior to the war,

but similarly when they became refugees, and it is an additional burden to have a potential working family member in school instead of contributing to the family's income. When Amina offers to help the family by working, her father insists that she remains in school with the hope that she will attend university later on (*Escape from Syria* 29). Amina on her own is also highly motivated to educate herself, depicted studying hard in a classroom and at home, expressing her determination while also stating "I struggled to understand the curriculum, all in a language [English] I had never seen" (*Escape from Syria* 33). This might be a rather hyperbolic statement, considering students were most likely learning in Arabic, not English, though they would have encountered English in their lives at times. However, Kullab is trying to signal to the reader here that, despite a shared language, attending a Lebanese school is definitely a challenge even for clever Syrian kids, therefore accentuating Amina's (and other refugee children's) plight to fit into their new circumstances.

In addition to the academic support, the family demonstrates physical and emotional closeness to each other through hugs, touches on the shoulders, holding hands, voiced endearments, and caring facial expressions This is not only visible during times of crisis but also in understated circumstances; for example, when Amina and her father are sitting in a bus in Toronto, "their eyes and body language betraying sadness and disconnection from their surroundings. They may be safe, but this wasn't the life they envisioned" (Omer 47). But the body language is also portraying a connection between the two, a strong emotional bond. Besides, when they are initially offered an interview for the resettlement process, Amina's mother falters and defying her husband's wishes leaves for Syria to see her sister's new baby. The husband's love for his wife overrides

his trepidation, recognizing her need to see some of her family of origin; however, the trip demonstrates to her that her former Syria is no longer, having witnessed executions by ISIS and other atrocities. The mother, therefore, agrees to be resettled. Fortunately for them, they are welcomed warmly in Canada. However, Kullab manages to rescue the narrative from becoming overly sentimental by telling and showing the reader not only how difficult this new beginning is (language acquisition, working in hard conditions, cultural differences, and so on) but also that Syria and the others left there are continuously struggling. The graphic novel ends with daughter and father on their way to Amina's school in Toronto overhearing the news about air strikes in a war-ravaged Syria. The father reads a text message with a plea for help and conceals it from Amina, sparing her worries and grief that he will have to deal with himself once she enters the school building.

The ending of Don Brown's graphic novel *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees* is (thankfully) also not redemptive, showing a range of situations that Syrians are facing—from happy family reunifications to dismal lives in refugee camps. Unlike Kallub's work, Brown's color palette is predominantly subdued mahogany and blue with occasional brighter hues for effect. Also, though he provides an extensive bibliography and helpful endnotes, Brown efficiently incorporates charts and maps into the actual stories, making the conflict easier to grasp. For example, he compares the population of Syria to that of Florida; he also shows how the influx of refugees from Syria to Lebanon is, proportionately, as if the entire population of Mexico moved to the United States. Brown also effectively portrays the gradually growing antipathy among the host countries against the refugees, making the title of his work well fitted. As stated earlier, Brown's

characters remain nameless, and their stories are told in an omniscient third person perspective. And yet, the author manages to capture some of the truly horrendous moments. For example, a man obviously anguished floating in the ocean states: "I tried to catch my wife and children in my arms. But one by one, they drowned" (*The Unwanted* 33). Brown states in an interview that "drawings are exempt from the voyeuristic quality that sometimes inhabits disaster photos" and that as "An artist [he] can expand, diminish, or group important elements in ways beyond a 'realistic' photograph" ("Five Questions for Don Brown" 40). Brown undeniably takes advantage of these techniques, and his drawings of grief-stricken faces in front of barren landscapes successfully convey the hardships of the refugees.

Nevertheless, as Molly Crabapple, a comic journalist in her own right, reminds us in her review of the work, "the mask-like interchangeable faces" provide an "anonymity" that is at times unsuccessful to make the reader establish closeness to the protagonists (16). In contrast, Julie Hakim Azzam in her review favorably views how the "illustrations have a sketchbook-like quality and feature faces drawn with minimal features that are nonetheless expressive, lending the subjects a sort of universality" (105). And though the refugee experience itself at times has universal aspects (terrible home situation, flight, resettlement, loss of loved ones, loss of identity, and so on), I would argue as discussed earlier that refugees themselves need to be seen as individuals transcending from a victim to a survivor in order to regain their dignity and agency. Glimpses of agency, especially in regards to the home situation, are rare in this book, particularly since Brown does not focus on one specific family or protagonist, but if we look at how tenderly family members treat each other, we can see that the young people come from loving

environments that foster agency and resilience. One of these examples is a short vignette of a teenage girl who protects and supports her two younger siblings through several attempts to flee Syria until all three are reunited with their mother in Denmark (*The Unwanted* 86). And *yet*, I still contend that Brown's characters' obscurity robs the reader of a deeper connection and the protagonists of their complex individual depiction.

Sea Prayer:

I would like to end this chapter with a discussion of a work that *succeeds* in its portrayal of personalized characters and a more private representation of a Syrian life prior to and during the war: Khaled Hosseini's *Sea Prayer*, illustrated by Dan Williams. Hosseini is the well-known best-selling author of *The Kite Runner*; *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. *Sea Prayer* is described by some critics as a "fictional letter" from a father to his son, Marwan, set on the eve of their dangerous sea crossing to Europe, the work reads to me rather like a poetic internal monologue that shifts to a prayer. The first nine pages, a bit over a third of this small book, start as a recollection of the family's life preceding the war, in which the father describes his memories of his youth, and then transitions to their nuclear family's life, including days at the grandfather's farmhouse and a loving description of Homs before the war. The father expresses his sadness that his son is too young to remember these days and instead knows a Homs with "skies spitting bombs. Starvation, Burials" and "that mothers and sisters and classmates can be found in narrow gaps between concrete, bricks, and exposed beams, little patches of sunlit skin shining in the dark." *Sea Prayer* appears different from the previous works, though it is marketed for all ages (seven or ten and up), because the narrator's voice is distinctly that of an

adult. Yet, in this work one can still see the foundations of agency that the father lays for his son and that the family and community had provided as well. Reviewing the categories identified by Cavazzoni et al., it is apparent that Marwan grew up in a family with social support, leisure activities, and religiosity—all markers for the creation of agency in children.

Hosseini's lyrical style is supported by Williams' beautiful watercolor landscapes of the rural and urban environments, which change into ominous gloomy gray images of a war-ravaged Homs and a threatening ocean. Williams' illustrations stunningly augment not only the father's sweet memories, his justified worries, but also his hope of a better future, depicted as a timid light-colored sunrise on the last page. The last third of the work is the actual description of the father and son on the beach, among the other refugees. Then the actual prayer of the father begins:

> Pray God steers the vessel true,
> when the shores slip out of eyeshot
> and we are a flyspeck
> in the heaving waters, pitching and tilting,
> easily swallowed.
> Because you,
> you are precious cargo. Marwan,
> the most precious there ever was.
> I pray the sea knows this.
> *Inshallah*.
> How I pray the sea knows this. (*Sea Prayer* np)

This is not a starry-eyed father; he knows not only the dangers of the sea, the loss of a wife, other children, neighbors, and loved ones, but also that they are not wanted in their host countries: "I have heard it said we are the uninvited. We are the unwelcome. We should take our misfortune elsewhere." This father is aware that even if they make the

boat crossing safely, their struggles are not over. Hosseini, therefore, ensures that the tentative hopeful colors of the last double spread do not give way to a redemptive narrative.

Hosseini was inspired to write *Sea Prayer* after the famous images of the drowned Syrian child Alan Kurdi circulated in the media. A former Afghan refugee, and a father of two children, Hosseini felt "bludgeoned" by Kurdi's image and further inspired in his work as a Goodwill Ambassador with the United Nations Refugee Agency to write the book as a tribute to the Kurdi family and all other refugees ("Khaled Hosseini Says a Succinct 'Sea Prayer' for a Refugee's Journey" np). In his work as a Goodwill Ambassador, he visited refugees in Italy and Lebanon and states, "what I've found is that people are dying to be heard"; in other words, unlike Don Brown's worries of journalistic voyeurism, Hosseini's encounters proved other authors' experiences and views—refugees want to share their stories, they want to have a *voice* in their life narrative ("Khaled Hosseini Says a Succinct 'Sea Prayer' for a Refugee's Journey" np).

The image of Alan Kurdi is either mentioned or depicted by several of the authors that I discuss in this dissertation. Bana Alabed's mother speaks about Kurdi in the context of the many deaths at sea; Mustafa crossed the sea the same day that Kurdi and his mother and five-year-old brother died, and she writes about reading about their deaths the next day; and an image of the three-year old boy washed up on the shore is included in *Escape from Syria*. However, considering the obvious link between *Sea Prayer*, the novel's author, and Kurdi, this is a good place to discuss in more detail the issues of depicting refugee bodies in the literature and the portrayal of a voice not of one's own in

general. This dissertation is focusing primarily on the positive influence of agency on trauma within Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults; however, it seems unavoidable to also address the discussion of representation and voice, and the topic is too complicated to relegate it to a footnote. Much has been written in postcolonial and postmodern criticism on voice and agency of the Other, such as Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak's seminal inquiry into the subaltern's ability to speak or Edward Said's reflections on the representations of the "Orient" within literature and media. In the context of Syrian refugee literature, the question once again emerges. Who gets to voice the story or who gets to represent the (dead) refugee bodies? There is no easy answer, and I continue to struggle with these questions and formulating appropriate responses.

The Syrian refugee literature thus far discussed has been written by several people, including Syrian refugees themselves (Alabed, Mustafa, Mardini, Kaadan, Fakher), former refugees or writers from a refugee background (Hosseini, Kullab, Khan), as well as journalists or writers interested in the conflict (Blumenthal, Brown, Latham). The last two groups seem to be the most interrogated by critics on their ability to represent true and fictionalized accounts of the refugees' stories. Moreover, the writers' motivations and the public's reception to these stories remain critical issues. I have found two critics' perspectives helpful in taking the often rather abstract issues of representation of the Other to a practical, bottom-line inquiry of effectiveness. James Dawes in *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity*, asks poignant questions about "the duty to reveal versus the injury of exposure" (5). Though he remains critical of the outcomes and successes of refugee stories to change their plight, he acknowledges how information changed the world before, for example, when Henry Dunant's war memoir inspired the

founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Geneva Conventions (9).

The other critic is Penelope Papailias who, in her article "(Un)seeing Dead Refugee Bodies: Mourning Memes, Spectropolitics, and the Haunting of Europe," probes the "memeification of Kurdi's corpse-image" (1048). Papailias provides great insight into philosophical and postmodern arguments for and against the representation of the (dead) Other and public bereavement practices, yet what I have found most striking is the effectiveness (as callous as this sounds) of Kurdi's image, or as Papailias says, "The performative and aggregative collective mourning for Kurdi, in other words, *did things*" (1060):

> This performative mourning also formed new social relations, sparked political debates, and redirected flows of people, resources, and attention. As regards the latter, there was an unprecedented movement of material goods and volunteers, particularly toward Greece (Raab and Parvini, 2015), but also of votes (this media event shifted the agenda in the Canadian election, favoring Liberal candidate Justin Trudeau . . . Following the global outcry around this image, we also saw the sudden throwing open of German and Austrian borders to take in refugees then trapped in Hungary . . . (1060-1061)

Skeptics will point out here that this collective mood of empathy and activism did not persist. Terrorist attacks, specifically the November 2015 Paris bombings, turned the European attitude against refugees. Also, former Chancellor Merkel's open policy towards refugees was rejected as shown by the entry of a far-right party in Germany's 2017 elections (Papailias 1061).[2] Others, such as Kerri Woods in "Refugees' Stories:

[2] It is interesting to note that even Alan Kurdi's family is divided on the representation of his dead body in the media. Kurdi's aunt sent pictures of the child to the media from a time when he was alive, well, and smiling, and she requested for him to be remembered

Empathy, Agency, and Solidarity," point out that the initial activism did not bring forth a permanent solution to the refugee crisis. Furthermore, Woods goes on to state her worries that Alan Kurdi's "death confirmed the archetype of the refugee as voiceless" and in need of Western media to tell his or her story in order to gain asylum (516).

Additionally, critics such as Bayan AlAmmouri voice concerns that artists (including writers) are profiting monetarily from these stories, even when, as is the case in Khaled Hosseini's *Sea Prayer*, a (small) amount of the book sales are donated to the UN refugee agency (218). AlAmmouri also accuses Hosseini (and other writers) of "catering to Western readers" and their "imagined sympathy" that would ensure these Western consumers of their own imagined "benevolence"' (220). However, I would argue that if a reader is moved by a novel to develop empathy for Syrian refugees and it leads to a better treatment of them (or any refugee, really), the writer has fulfilled one of his or her goals. I will continue to stress, therefore, the power of storytelling and the importance for the Syrian refugees to find themselves in the works and to express their agency, as well as for audiences to understand the Syrian refugees' plight in order to become better informed and to support the refugees' continued agency. Perhaps it is the former social worker in me, but I do measure success not only by abstract changes in perception, but by real-world positive changes in the interactions among humans.

Portraying the father's life and thoughts in a very personal fashion humanizes and enables the character, making *Sea Prayer* a work about empowerment and personal

---

as such (Papailias 1054, 1062). On the other hand, "Kurdi's father, who survived the boat accident, stated: 'People must not look away from the terrible things happening on the way to Europe just because we cannot get a visa'" (qtd in Papailias 1054).

choices despite the refugee trauma presented from a secondary source (not a Syrian). The work also fulfills the criteria for agency suggested not only by Cavazzoni et al., such as finding meaning and hope in the future through religious beliefs (it is, after all, titled a "prayer"), but also by Flynn and Gubar who see strength in familial ties to express agency and a strong kinship model to support young people—all concepts well expressed through the loving words of the father. Yes, ideally, refugees should tell their own stories to increase their sense of agency, but it strikes me as a mistake to discard the entire value of refugee stories not told by the "owner," and, therefore, reducing literature to a mere collection of autobiographical accounts. (Fictional) stories, regardless their author, have since the beginning of mankind told us about ourselves and others, made us understand the world, created connections, and helped us become our better selves, and this holds true in the case of the Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults as well.

CHAPTER TWO

FLIGHT

Into the Sea

Barely out of the jetty, the boat rises
with every wave, and in the back
two or three fall into the sea.

At sunset the boat starts to lose
air, fills with water, mother
sand babies fall into the sea.

One side stays afloat. We cling
to a rope, water up to our bellies
and people fall into the sea.

All night we grip and bleed.
Rain so cold, waves five stories high.
If only I could fall into the sea.

Sunrise, a helicopter. I find
a red shirt, wave it to them.
They watch us fall into the sea.

They fling a small inflatable boat.
I am too weak to reach it.
Others try and fall into the sea.

A cargo boat throws a rope,
gets us on board. Alive at last,
and we still fall into the sea.

(Mattawa 437)

I labeled this chapter as "Flight," though many people, myself included within this dissertation, refer to the refugees' escape and travel to another place as a journey. However, journey sounds rather innocuous to me for a process that entails so much danger, hardship, and sorrow. Perhaps authors use exactly this dichotomy of a somewhat harmless word to describe such a harrowing experience, considering that two picture

books addressing specifically the escape of refugees have "journey" in their title: *The Journey* by Francesca Sanna and *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey* by Margriet Ruurs and Nizar Ali Badr. As I did in the first chapter, I would like to start this section with a book unlike my oeuvre of stories, Sanna's *The Journey*. The work is different because it does not specifically address the Syrian war; nevertheless, it is so poignant in its treatment of escaping one's country (and partially inspired by the Syrian refugees encountered by the author), thus making it an excellent book to introduce issues of flight.

The Journey:

Francesca Sanna is originally from Italy, a country very much embedded in the so-called European refugee crisis since many refugees either wind up there in camps or use Italy as a stepping point to get to other northern European countries. Sanna was inspired to write *The Journey* after meeting refugees at a refugee center in Italy and, like so many other writers (refugees and not), she wanted the discussion to be about "empathy and understanding" and not merely "abstract statistics about the number of people and monetary costs" (Sanna, "Teaching Empathy for a Better World" 70). The author chose an anonymous family without specifying their country of origin, since she believes that all people are entitled to live safely (Sanna, "Teaching Empathy for a Better World" 70). However, as is apparent in some of the illustrations, minarets and headscarves give the impression that the protagonists are from an Islamic region, while the flora and fauna of the host country, presented in a book the mother shows to the children (we never actually see the family arrive there) denotes a Nordic destination. The story is told in first-person,

yet it is not clear if by the daughter or son, detaching the experience of the escape from a particular gender.

The work begins with two double spreads of a heteronormative family of four playing and building castles at the beach, a place the narrator tells us is close to their home, recalling beaches they used to frequent every summer until the war began. War is symbolized as dark waters filling the pages and transforming into grasping hands. Then directly on the third double spread, the narrator states, "the war took my father," leaving behind a grieving mother and her two children (*The Journey* np). The mother makes the decision to flee the country. Answering her children's questions about the destination, she climbs up a ladder on a filled bookshelf and brings forth a book to show her kids the safe location they will go to. The three pack their suitcases and start their journey in a car the mother is driving "at night to avoid being seen." The family then changes twice into a different vehicle, hiding between items, and the speaker tells us that "the further we go… the more we leave behind" until in the middle of the book, the three find themselves on foot and without any belongings at a border wall in a forest. The family is minuscule in the left-hand corner of the dark forest on a double spread with a wall that seems rather arbitrarily placed in the woods. On the next double spread, a gigantic, red bearded border guard towers over the family, shouting at them to return and not permitting them entrance. The family hides in the forest and, in one of the best moments of the work, the child narrator tells the reader: "In the darkness the noises of the forest scare me. But mother is with us and she is never scared. We close our eyes and finally fall asleep," while the complementing illustration shows a crying, terrified mother holding her two sleeping children.

Their journey continues on the next double spread with an ominous smuggler, portrayed as a massive black figure with menacing eyes, who helps the family cross the border. For several days they are in a small ferry "with so many people!" and "waves grow bigger and bigger." Though the picture book has an open ending, the last three double spreads are filled with hope and a light color palette. The family lands on the shore at sun rise, after which "we travel for more days and more nights, crossing many borders [not depicted]. From the train I look up to the birds that seem to be following us…They are migrating just like us… I hope, one day, like these birds, we will find a new home. A home where we can be safe and begin our story again." The narrator states this while the reader sees the family sitting on a bird in flight.

The Journey is recommended by reviewers for three- to seven-year-olds, which explains some of the book's limitations, such as the mild depiction of war and the lack of actual violence. As discussed before, critics find fault with the absence of a place of origin and lack of explanation to children why a war started. As Ekaterina Strekalova-Hughes emphasizes, it is detrimental to portray the host countries as enclaves of heavenly safety, which only increases the contrast of "them versus us," and the illusion that the host countries are flawless places for their inhabitants and the refugees. These representations foster the assumptions that non-Western places are automatically areas of struggle, where "the others" live. Though in Sanna's defense, the family's home and country are also depicted beautifully. This is a family who had a good life and only left it when their existence there became unbearable. Also, *The Journey* is one of the most visually beautiful picture books about the refugee experience I have encountered. As Thom Barthelmess, a critic in *The Horn Book Magazine*, states, "Sanna's stylized

illustrations, with gargantuan villains and swirling inky black, are both captivating and unsettling" (77). Moreover, the family's fears and hopes are compellingly depicted, the family's journey into safety seems endless, and one cannot help but read the book with bated breath. Even when the flora and fauna of the safe place is at times portrayed unrealistically idealistic, it is also the beauty of the animals and nature that make this work superb.

Trauma and agency are well balanced in *The Journey*. Though certainly intended for younger audiences, the fear of capture is visceral and leaves readers without any doubt that this family's flight is traumatic. The use of black space to convey dark emotions such as the sorrow of losing the father is also very effective. Additionally, the depiction of borders as arbitrary divisions, created by humans to split lands inhabited by friendly forest animals reveals to readers the absurdity of manmade structures that separate humans from each other and "othering" the strangers. Moreover, the greed and danger associated with the smuggler represents an aspect of the machinery of gluttony and menace associated with escaping one's beloved home country. On the other hand, the family displays agency in their response to their situation. This is a comfortable middle-class family (as evidenced by the interior decorations, plentiful bookshelves, the yearly vacations) with a mother who has the means and makes the decision to escape (she has enough money to pay a smuggler and ride a train with her children). She is seemingly a very modern woman, who nonetheless dresses modestly, and does not wear a headscarf. Her attire seems contemporary and practical. She is literate, perhaps even educated (reading a book at the beach and visibly comfortable in their bookshelf-covered home),

capable of driving a car and riding a bicycle. (In my experience, neither is a given skill for many women in Islamic countries.)

Furthermore, she keeps her children and herself safe during the journey by hiding in the forest, negotiating with the smuggler, and navigating through several countries on their journey to their host country. In terms of the criteria established by Cavazzoni et al., the parental love, especially that of the mother since the father was killed early on (nonetheless also presented lovingly engaged with the kids in the beach scene at the beginning), allows the children to "display emotional and behavioral competencies" such as appropriate emotional reactions (for example, sadness, fear, hope) as well as the skills to support the mother through the escape, for instance, by hiding quietly when necessary and being self-controlled and orderly throughout the escape—not an easy accomplishment for little children (561).

After the publication of *The Journey*, Sanna in collaboration with schools and libraries facilitated workshops for children about topics of immigration, the plight of refugees, empathy, and so on. These workshops made her realize that children had universal fears, regardless of their background, especially the fear of being in a new school. Inspired by this knowledge, Sanna wrote *Me and My Fear* to communicate to children their shared humanity regardless of their cultural upbringing. Sanna published *Me and My Fear* in 2018, two years after *The Journey*, which is a story about a young girl's fear of being in school in her host country. Apropos, the characters from *Me and My Fear* resemble those of *The Journey*, but the two works can be read and understood independently. It is the author's hope that "Introducing a child to this concept of

empathy… is the key to a united, globally conscious world" ("Empathy for a Better World" 72). In this work, too, one could criticize the lack of political background information and not situating the child's problems within a socio-historical context. On the other hand, Sanna excels in her depiction of feelings and the girl's emotional development, as well as in foregrounding the universality of fear as a shared human emotion while once more providing the readers with a work filled with beautiful illustrations.

Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey:

As the title suggests, the beforementioned work by Margriet Ruurs and Nizar Ali Badr's *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey* concentrates on the protagonist's and her family's escape. Yet a large part of the work is also about the family's idyllic life prior to the war, along with three pages about their new life in their host country. The book is written in free verse from the first-person perspective of a little girl, Rama, who flees her village with her father, mother, grandfather, and little brother. (The words are in English with Arabic translations, by Falah Raheem, below the English text.) Rama and her family must trek across lands and cross the sea (and witness people drowning). However, *Stepping Stones* has an unequivocally happier ending than *The Journey*. Rama and her family are welcomed with open arms by their unnamed host country and they are filled with great hope for the family's future.

The work starts with Rama reflecting on how her life used to be when she was woken up by the rooster's crow, and listened to her mother prepare breakfast. The narrator provides a detailed description of the meal: "bread, yogurt, juicy red tomatoes/

from our garden" (*Stepping Stones* np). She also describes how she played with her brother and friends, their laughter, and feelings of freedom. Her father, coming home from his work in the fields, "would sit for a time under the orange tree/ and tell stories of our ancestors." Rama's seemingly idyllic existence ends when the war comes and changes their entire lives with food scarcity, bombs, and a stream of villagers leaving their homes. When the bombs fall too close to their home, Rama's family also decides to "join the river of people,/ time to leave all that we knew… I lay awake and listened to the wind,/ wondering if the moon rises the same way/ in other places." The narrator describes their long and arduous journey of walking, and then their scary and heartbreaking crossing of the sea, and more walking until they arrive at their host country. There, Rama and her family are filled with mixed feelings of survivors' guilt and, despite the kind reception, a yearning for their former home.

What is most remarkable about *Stepping Stones* is not the story itself, though Canadian writer Ruurs' poetic words are evocative, but the artwork by Nazir Ali Badr, which is most astonishing. He tells this whole story without actual facial expressions, yet the rocks artistically placed communicate an entire range of feelings such as joy, love, hope, sorrow, being burdened with fear, and utter fatigue. Some reviewers "highly recommend this book for every primary and elementary school," and others confessed that "I could not but be moved by Badr's work, as it is unlike anything else I have ever seen and conveys so much emotion" (Pennell 11; O'Brien 30). Syrian artist Badr, who was born in the sea city of Latakia and still lives there, creates sculptures from the stones he finds at his native seashore. He does not have the resources to keep his projects; as Ruurs explains, "he does not even have the money to buy the glue that would give

permanence to his art" ("Foreword" np). He usually takes his artwork apart after he photographs it. Ruurs had seen one of Badr's photographs on a Facebook post and decided to track him down, and with the help of multiple people created *Stepping Stones* in partnership with Badr ("Foreword"). This book is truly a testament to the power of collaboration and the beauty of artistic expression. It is also a great example of agency. Despite horrendous circumstances, Badr continues to create artworks while enduring a war in his homeland.

Though the story itself does not situate the narrator in Syria specifically, Ruur's "Foreword" locates the picture book within the context of the war, and the author's and artist's profiles in the back of the book provide more information to the readers. *Stepping Stones* might not offer much context of the Syrian conflict, but it is filled with plentiful details about the land and its people to convey a sense of place and belonging, lifting it from the anonymity of a universal story to a personal narrative, albeit fictional. Moreover, Ruurs and Badr include for the readers the context that life before the war was lived under a dictatorship by showing adults and children behind bars and stating: "But Jedo [Rama's grandfather] said we weren't really free./ If we're not allowed to sing our songs,/ to dance our dances,/ to pray the prayers of our choice,/ are we truly free?" The Syrian government was not known for oppressing minorities per se, considering it was run by a minority group; however, some minorities even in pre-war Syria were repressed such as the Kurds, Assyrians, and some politically inclined Palestinians, which makes this page particularly thought-provoking for its nuances and ambiguities.

In terms of agency, this is a family filled with love for one another, and dedicated to upholding their traditions and culture. The father tells them about their "ancestors," and the mother "sewed silk scarves for me and my dolls./ Wrapped in silk and hugs." Rama is forced to share her food with her brother when the war comes, and the mother goes hungry to feed her children, and yet their love for each other prevails. The narrator also tells us that everyone leaving is making this decision not only out of desperation but also out of hope: "a stream driven by hope./ Mothers, fathers, children,/ seeking a better place, a better life… A river of people in search of peace." This is also a family aware of the importance of mourning, which, as the psychologist and eminent trauma therapist Judith Lewis Herman states, "is the only way to give due honor to loss; there is no adequate compensation" (189-190). The children demonstrate this form of agency when they take it upon themselves to "say goodbye to the flowers in our yard,/ to our goat,/ to the soil we called home," and the adults mirror the importance of mourning when the parents "planted seeds/ to grow flowers/ to remember those who did not reach freedom [but drowned on the sea crossing]." At the same time, Rama's voice is strong and authentic throughout the work. As Michael Wyness explains in his section on psychosocial approaches that help children with war: "The quality of relationships that children have with their families, neighbors, faith leaders and peers are critical for children's abilities to cope with war" (159). Rama demonstrates these skills. This is a child able to express her feelings of fear, suffering, joy, and attachment, and since her connection with her kin is strong, it is clear to the reader that she will be able to manage the losses of the war and the changes in lifestyle in the new host country. Though the ending may be somewhat redemptive, the yearning for their original home, the

acknowledged losses along the way, and the sheer quality of the art make up for any shortcomings.

A Land of Permanent Goodbyes:

One book that exemplifies the refugees' journey in its many aspects is Atia Abawi's *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*, marketed for young adult readers and centering on the main protagonist, a thirteen-year-old named Tareq. The differing stages of fleeing Syria are exceptionally well depicted. Tareq, his little sister, and their father (the only remaining members of their family after a bomb hits their apartment complex) must survive getting through check points manned by Islamic fundamentalists and others by Assad soldiers, crossing the sea in a little dinghy, walking for weeks through European countries, and battling hunger in hostile (host) countries. They witness harrowing scenes of executions and become victims of labor exploitation, while trying to endure life in the different stages of their escape until they reach Germany, which is not quite the refuge they had hoped for.

Through all the hardships though, the remarkable Tareq chooses kindness and love in his interactions, not only with his family members but also everyone he encounters. I see these choices as clear expressions of his agency to determine what kind of human he wants to be. Tareq elects to treat his four-year-old sister with much care during their journey and even at some point places himself in jeopardy to prevent another teenager's rape by her smuggler. He pays for his choices with prematurely graying hair and growing into a man too soon. On the other hand, Tareq receives support not only from his immediate family, but also from members of his community, for example, when

their apartment complex collapses after the bombing. This social support and reciprocity, as Kolk explains, are "the most powerful protection against becoming overwhelmed by stress and trauma" (81). Love and connectedness to other humans are important in surviving trauma and providing the individual with fortitude to express agency. It is as if the expressions of affection by their loved ones and, by extension, their community and anyone willing to help shield the traumatized from succumbing entirely to their suffering.

Help comes also in the form of aid workers, cementing the theme of "helpers" and "hunters" further, which appears throughout the book and is directly addressed by the narrator at some point: "Helpers come in many forms. As do the hunters" (180). This theme of the helpers' importance is also the epigraph of the novel. It is likewise repeated in Alexia's comforting advice to Tareq; she tells him that Mr. Rogers (a television personality) was told by his mother to "always look for the helpers" (255). Alexia is one of the noteworthy characters fulfilling the role of a helper in the novel. She originally arrived in Greece from Connecticut, United States as a tourist and to visit extended family and remained to volunteer in a nongovernmental organization (NGO) to assist the refugees landing on one of the islands. Alexia comes from a refugee and migrant family herself (her father was a Jewish Russian émigré and her mother's family were Greek immigrants), and she feels connected to the refugees and her family's history through the aid work she provides. However, the novel neither glamorizes Alexia's contributions nor sentimentalizes her feelings. Her labor is physically demanding, her living conditions are meager, and the emotional trauma is at times severe: "The joy of saving one [refugee] was always overpowered with the grief of not being able to save another. . . . Every boat weighted heavy on her spirit—both those that didn't make it and those that did" (110).

Although Alexia's story ends happily—she starts a romantic relationship with another aid worker and, of course, she has the option to go back to a normal life whenever she decides to leave her volunteer work—her compassion and personal interest in the actual refugees as individuals brings redemption to her character.

Atia Abawi's *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* is told from the first-person omniscient perspective of "Destiny," reminiscent of the "Death" narrator in *The Book Thief* written by Markus Zusak (published in 2005), and at times it seems those two narrators could be interchangeable. *The Book Thief* is a coming-of-age story set during the Nazi times with themes focusing on mortality, love, and the power of language. As Jenni Adams in her article "'Into Eternity's Certain Breath': Ambivalent Escapes in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*" explains, Zusak's novel was marketed and published as a crossover text for adults as well as teenagers (222). For Adams, Death's consolatory and supernatural redemptive imagery falls short of its purpose and is complicated through triangular gazes (the adult reader, the perceived child, the adult's imagined self as a former child). Death as the narrator in *The Book Thief* has a quirky sense of humor and seems at times amused with himself; he does become macabre. He also keeps reassuring readers of his kindness and connectedness to them.

In contrast, Destiny as the speaker in *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* appears conflicted between hope and resignation. Yet, I find Destiny on occasion to be too preachy, a bit patronizing, and lacking Zusak's Death's humor. At the same time, Abawi's Destiny does not conjure problematic redemptive imagery; instead, the narrator does not shy away from the horrors of war and terrorism, such as the description of brutal

beheadings and human heads on metal spikes, without providing the reader with the compensatory love of Death's embrace. Death by his own admission confesses at the end of the novel that he is "haunted by humans" (*The Book Thief* 550). Destiny instead ends the work with a threat to the reader: "I hope you will provide that warmth [the refugees are searching for], be that helper, do what you can to make the world a better place. Because when I meet you—and I will—there will be a reckoning. There always is" (*A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* 272). Destiny makes it clear repeatedly to the reader that humans have a choice to either be kind or to profit from others' suffering. The choice to be kind is a significant theme that runs through the novel, and is epitomized by certain protagonists such as Tareq and Alexia. The characters are at their best when they make positive choices to help others and use what Cavazzoni et al. call "social support as a manifestation of agency itself" (559).

Perhaps the biggest difference between Zusak's Death and Abawi's Destiny pertains to the authors' intentions in the creation of the narrators and the works in general. Zusak states that he "wanted Death to be the missing piece of us" and "to talk about those things [clouds, trees, earth, etc.] as if they were colleagues—as if all the elements of the world, and life and death, are just part of the same thing" ("Bonus Material" in *The Book Thief* np). Abawi's goals are much timelier and tangible: she hopes that her work will foster understanding of the refugee crisis, create empathy for the refugees, and inspire a willingness to help others, who "are real people, with real lives, real hopes, real dreams" like her characters ("Authors Note" in *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* 285). Abawi, a professional journalist who had covered the Middle East and Asia for over a decade, properly researched the situation of the Syrian refugees with

interviews of Syrians in Greece and Turkey, as well as others still in Syria via phone and skype. Her family had escaped Afghanistan during the Soviet war and she was born in Germany. A year after her birth her family resettled as refugees in the United States ("Authors Note" in *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* 282). Abawi's journalism and personal refugee background is reflected in detailed descriptions of the intelligibly explained Syrian conflict. Abawi would be in agreement with critics such as Ekaterina Strekalova-Hughes, who underlines the importance of explaining to readers the origins of armed conflicts in order to create not only empathetic but also politically informed citizens. Additionally, Abawi does not sugarcoat the situations in host countries; Europe does not receive absolution for its treatment of the refugees, or its (and the United States') historical involvement that engendered many of the conflicts around the globe.

There are moments in *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* that I find too forced, such as the kidnapping and successful rescue of Tareq's sister, the presumed dead but then resurfaced brother, and one of the love stories (between Alexia and another aid worker).[1] Nevertheless, this novel shines in its complexities, especially in presenting topics that other works do not mention or barely address, such as the multifaceted aspects of help or lack of it. The author portrays kindly some of the volunteers who help the refugees stranded on Greek islands. At the same time, the narrator describes how authorities threaten native Greeks trying to assist the refugees with "fines and jail time" under the guise of preventing human trafficking (113). Moreover, the novel discusses how some of

[1] Susan is kidnapped for purposes of human trafficking, most likely child sexual exploitation, which is an issue all around the globe, but particularly in refugee camps, destitute urban areas, and other places that situate children in vulnerable positions.

the NGOs not only divert donations into their pockets, but correspondingly create a "war tourism" industry, in which tourists disguised as aide workers only come for the selfies and not for real support to the refugees (115). Simultaneously, the novel highlights the extensive efforts by legitimate NGOs and private citizens and how these efforts often clash with the agenda of police forces and right winged parties, whose aim is to deter refugees from entering Europe.

Butterfly:

The unwelcoming reception of (Syrian) refugees in their host countries as well as in the nations they travel through, is discussed in several of the works. Yusra Mardini in *Butterfly*, details her journey to Germany and the humiliation she felt by Lebanese, Turkish, Greek, and Hungarian officials as well as citizens. In one absurd episode, the Mardini sisters and the rest of their refugee group get arrested in Hungry because a girl on the train, sitting in the same wagon, fears that they might be terrorists trying to bomb the train. After being treated nicely by Mardini and the others, the girl breaks into tears, realizing she had committed an error by calling the authorities. Alas, it was too late. She had already alerted the police, and Mardini and the others are arrested, treated like criminals, and then deported to a refugee camp (without obvious charges) (*Butterfly* 173-175). [2] Mardini feels lucky that they had not been sent to a Hungarian prison, considering

[2] As of March 2022, Sara Mardini, the sister of Yusra Mardini, after more than three months in a Greek high-security prison, is back in Germany with her family and awaiting her trial with others from her former NGO for serious charges: espionage, human trafficking, money laundering, and membership of a criminal organization. After establishing herself with her family in Germany, Sara Mardini had gone back to Greece as a volunteer to help other stranded refugees. Unlike her sister, Yusra, Sara Mardini was not able to pursue her swimming career due to multiple shoulder issues and, therefore,

that the refugee camp is already horrific, and the stories of refugees' abuse in the hands of Hungarian prison guards are legendary (*Butterfly* 180-183). At the same time, it is in Hungary that some of the refugees find their voice by protesting and clashing with the police (167). It is here that Yusra starts using *her voice*. She contacts one of the journalists who had interviewed her after their sea crossing and leaves him a detailed voice mail, asking him to cover the situation in Hungary. Moreover, Yusra starts using social media, specifically Instagram, to connect with and inform the world of her and the other refugees' situation. To her surprise, she starts accumulating more and more followers, and slowly turns into a minor celebrity (165).

Yusra and Sara Mardini made several decisions throughout their journey from Syria to Germany, starting with the choice to depart Syria in the first place (as discussed in the previous chapter) to the route they took, the help they offered other refugees along the way, and the decision to tell their story to journalists. The most publicized and most inaccurately retold story by the media of their escape is of their sea crossing from Turkey. Here is a brief summary of how Yusra Mardini conveys the story: the sisters are crammed in a little dinghy with twenty people, most of whom cannot swim, on a trip that should have lasted less than an hour. However, fifteen minutes into the crossing, the

---

decided to use her abilities as a refugee aide. The criminal charges, according to Sara Mardini and other group members, are based on attempts from Greek authorities to criminalize NGOs and other private citizens volunteering to help refugees (See Smith, Helena. "Bard College Berlin Student Sara Mardini Arrested for Aiding Refugees in Greece." np). When European countries stopped their initial welcome of (Syrian) refugees, NGOs along with refugees became targets not only of police brutality but also victims of unfounded criminal investigations. See also Alex Palmer's article in *The New York Times Magazine* about the European refugee crisis, treatment of NGOs, and the charges against Sara Mardini.

engine chokes and stops while waves are crashing down, filling the dinghy with water, and spinning it around. The refugees throw everything disposable overboard but still fear the dinghy will capsize. One of the men (who cannot swim) carefully lowers himself into the water to give the boat more lift and to righten its direction. While the refugees on the boat are praying loudly and calling Allah, Sara Mardini follows suit and lowers herself into the sea. Against her sister's judgment, Yusra also gets into the water. Even though they are professional swimmers, the sisters struggle in the ocean since the conditions are entirely different than an athletic pool, and the sisters never trained in the sea. In the meantime, one of the refugees tries to alert the Greek coastguard, who tells him to return and dismisses his plea for help. (He is not able to reach the Turkish coastguard at all.) Then he calls his family in Syria and asks them to post about their situation in a Facebook group dedicated to boats in distress. He gives the boat's location via a pin to his family. By the way, Facebook groups are another new aspect of digital ways refugees, who can afford smart phones, manage their journeys. Unfortunately, in this case and in many others, the post did not help them get rescued. After three hours, the sisters asked to be lifted back into the boat and for someone else to get into the water. However, as luck would have it, the engine, which had been repeatedly tried to no avail, starts up again, and they get close to the coastline. It is Sara then, once more, who gets back into the water and, after an additional excruciating twenty minutes, is able to guide the dinghy to shore (104-116).

Yusra gives full credit to her sister and the others in her memoir, and still their story becomes distorted by the media. I read several inaccurate accounts while doing research for this dissertation. The most outlandish, nevertheless, are the ones recounted

by Yusra herself in *Butterfly*. She states that several of the articles have only her pushing or pulling the boat; sometimes they include her sister or the others; often they omit everyone all together: "The most ludicrous ones have me, alone, with a rope tied around my waist, swimming freestyle, and pulling a boat crammed with 150 people to safety. Like a cartoon. Like superwoman" (246).[3] Yusra Mardini handles her fame (and inaccurate representation) with as much humor and grace as possible, but in addition to her struggles of accepting her refugee status, she finds herself grappling with her survival story: "I say the same words, over and over again. It's impossible to relive the horror of the crossing for each reporter. My heart stays shut, I lock the calm smile onto my face" (246). Mardini's empowerment does not come from sharing her story with reporters, but from her active role in her own survival, something which Kolk stresses makes a person feel like an agent instead of a victim in their own life (*The Body Keeps the Score* 52). This also explains her assured voice in her memoir once she embraces her status as a refugee ambassador, and willingly goes to the Olympics as well as represents refugees in the media to draw attention to the refugee crisis. When Yusra Mardini focuses on her own actions, her voice becomes more confident, and she finds purpose in her existence, which in turn helps her cope with her trauma and the loss of her beloved Syria, and with it her former life.

[3] For some astute insights on the media representation of Yusra Mardini, see Enrico Michelini's article "The Representation of Yusra Mardini as a Refugee Olympic Athlete: A Sociological Analysis" and Ryan Turcott & Emma S. Ariyo's article "Disrupting the Global Refugee Crisis or Celebrity Humanitarianism? Media Frames of the Refugee Olympic Team at 2016 Rio and 2020 Tokyo Summer Games."

The Girl from Aleppo:

Nujeen Mustafa in her memoir *The Girl from Aleppo: Nujeen's Escape from War to Freedom* also describes a process of coming of age, finding her voice, and discovering her particular agency—in her personal life as well as politically. Both Mustafa's and Mardini's novels could be read as a Bildungsroman with two differing heroines. I addressed differences and similarities between Mustafa's and Mardini's words in the previous chapter, but I think it is warranted to bring some of them up again for further examination. Mardini's life was privileged financially, socially, and physically prior to the war since she was middle-class, from a well-respected family, and trained as a competitive swimmer. Mustafa, on the other hand, was from a poor family, a disrespected minority (Kurdish), and struggled with disabilities due to cerebral palsy. At first glance, the two teenagers seem very different. However, they were also both spoiled brats, coddled and pampered, of course all within the means of their respective families. Therefore, when Mardini and Mustafa make choices during their journeys, when they find their bravery, and their voice—which has stayed with them still until today—they developed from indulgent teens to young women.

Mustafa encounters hurdles similar to Mardini's on her journey from Syria to Germany, such as mistreatment by the police and refugee camps with terrible conditions. She also uses digital technology to navigate through the countries and makes informed choices along the way. Mustafa, her sister, and others from their group traveling together are stuck for a while at Moria, a refugee camp in Lesbos. The place is so awful that "refugees referred to it as the Jungle" (*The Girl from Aleppo* 155). But it is even worse

for Mustafa, who could not find restrooms or bathrooms to accommodate her needs as a person with disabilities (154). Mustafa and her sister read maps of Europe on their phones, look for directions on Facebook groups like "The Safe and Free Route to Asylum for Syrians," consult with others, and also pray profusely (165). Additionally, Mustafa's longstanding interest in self-education (she was not able to attend school in Syria since her family and community could not provide proper devices, for example a motorized wheelchair, needed to manage a regular school) and the English language help her communicate with strangers, later with reporters, and ultimately support her and her family in their transition to Germany.

Mustafa thus exemplifies Cavazzoni's criteria for agency on different levels. Her curiosity and thirst for knowledge allow her to exercise her "creativity and personal skills" to improve her and her family's situation (Cavazzoni et al. 559). Furthermore, her Islamic faith provides her with "a strong spiritual connectedness within the community," which, as Cavazzoni explains "helps children in attributing meaning to experiences and also to develop strategies to cope with hardship" (561). This "connectedness" is also evident in Mustafa's cultural as well as sociopolitical understanding of her Kurdish identity from which she draws great strength. Mustafa likewise finds agency in her "civic and political engagement," which functions as a "buffer against symptoms of distress and trauma" (Cavazzoni et al. 559). This "engagement" can be seen in her role as a refugee ambassador, as well as the narrator of her memoir, where she appeals to the reader to see refugees not as the "other," but instead blameless for the precarious situation they find themselves in. Distinct and clear also is Mustafa's agency as a "relational notion," not only within the micro level of her family, the mezzo level of her ethnic group, but also

within the macro level as a Syrian refugee, and in extension on a meta level—a member of humanity—a relationship Mustafa repeatedly stresses (Cavazzoni et al. 559).

Refugee:

This meta level of connection is also a theme in Alan Grantz's fictional novel *Refugee*. The book is a trio of stories each focused on separate characters that are linked through their humanity, their similar experiences as refugees, and an ending that interlaces the three narratives through time and place. Gratz's novel is told in chronological order with each chapter alternating between the three refugees. As Zachary Chauvin in his review points out, "This style lends a lot to the idea of shared experiences, where the trials of one were in some way or other also the trial of another" (40). Although most reviews I read seem to find this style artistically satisfying, I concur with Chauvin when he states, "Our sympathies are therefore stretched across all characters in a more general way and in some cases this may diminish the overall impact" (40). I further agree with Chauvin's analysis that "Gratz in this way wishes to emphasize the importance of being a kind global citizen and for all to recognize the strength of human will before the immensity of war and poverty" (40). The "Author's Note" at the end of the novel similarly reflects this idea of a shared humanity and a specific call to join efforts in helping displaced people by donating to refugee organizations.

The first story is loosely based on true events but with fictional characters ("Author's Note" 325). It is about twelve-year-old Josef and his family's escape from Nazi Germany in 1939. They manage to get on a ship bound for Cuba with more than 900 Jewish passengers. Joseph is forced to act like an adult since his father, who had returned

from a concentration camp as a shattered and paranoid person, is unable to fulfill any parental role. The ship is turned away by the Cuban government without asylum being grated to the Jewish passengers. Josef's father leaps overboard and is rescued by a Cuban policeman. European countries then decide to split the passengers amongst themselves; and just as Josef, his mother, and sister are trying to build a new life, their new country, France, is invaded by Germany. They flee Paris but are taken into custody by German soldiers. Josef's mother, in exchange for her earrings, is forced to bargain the freedom for one of her children. Josef, in his role as the older brother and man of the family, asks for his sister's life to be spared. Josef's story ends here, and the reader does not know the outcome until the end of the last of the trio of stories. The second narrative tells about eleven-year-old Isabel, who in 1994 leaves Cuba with her family after President Castro's announcement that Cubans would be allowed to depart the island if they could manage it. Isabel and her family, risking their lives, flee on a makeshift raft to Miami with their beloved neighbors to escape political oppression and poverty. They must survive a terrible storm; the neighbor's son, Isabel's friend, is injured by sharks and succumbs to his wounds; Isabel's mother gives birth to a premature baby; and the U.S. Coast Guard tries to stop them from entering the United States. Isabel's grandfather, the retired Cuban policeman who all his life had felt guilt-ridden for not helping the Jewish passengers fifty years earlier, jumps off the raft to distract the Coast Guard and, therefore, enables his family to have a better life in the United States.

The third story in *Refugee* is about twelve-year-old Mahmoud, who in 2015 flees his hometown Aleppo, Syria, with his family after Russian missiles destroy their apartment building. Their narrative is filled with heart-wrenching moments and a perilous

journey that entails dangerous check points, terrible refugee camps, detention centers, closed boarders, criminal smugglers, monetary and work exploitation, and police harassment. However, the worst moment is during their Mediterranean Sea crossing when their dinghy crashes into rocks and the family is thrown into the water. Mahmoud is unable to keep himself and his infant sister afloat, and he persuades a passenger on another dinghy to take her. Mahmoud's mother hands Hana over to the strangers, and is only able to convey the baby's name. The other dinghy, filled to the brim with refugees, and unwilling to take in more passengers, leaves Mahmoud and the rest of his family behind. Mahmoud, his family, and the reader never see baby Hana again. Her fate is unknown. However, when Mahmoud and his family reach Austria and then Germany, they are not only welcomed with open arms but also find refuge with an elderly couple, Saul and Ruthie Rosenberg. This is where the story comes full circle. Ruthie is Josef's saved sister, who after WWII married another German Jew, and had kids and grandkids of her own, and who is now in the position to house and help other refugees. Correspondingly, Germany—the country that once killed and exiled Jews (and others)—is welcoming Muslim refugees, people who are religiously and culturally unlike most Germans.

I think it is interesting to note that none of the reviews or scholarly articles find the surprising overlap of characters awkward or too convenient; instead, they merely think them skillfully intertwined. Nor have any of the critics struggled with the redemptive ending, in which Ruthie promises Mahmoud that his sister is still alive, that they will find Hana "and bring her home," and that "Everything is going to be all right now" (*Refugee* 316). Of course, the implication here is that "home" is now Germany with

the Rosenbergs and "everything" is life in its entirety for this Syrian family. Ruthie's claims seem far-fetched to me; there is no guarantee that Hana is alive or that she can be located, and life in Germany as a Syrian refugee is not "all right" even with a loving surrogate family like the Rosenbergs. In contrast, in the "Author's Note," Gratz uses a double narrative, similar to Nadine Kaadan's (as discussed in Chapter One), where he describes the situation in Syria, a "lost generation" of children who will grow up only knowing war and who most likely will parish in the conflict (336). Additionally, he points out that the European countries are closing their borders and that the temporary warm welcome of refugees has turned chilly.[4]

Perhaps Gratz offers the reader a redemptive ending to fend off any despair and to balance some of the atrocities experienced by the protagonists in all three stories. Also, maybe it is difficult to motivate a reader to donate money to charitable refugee organizations when a novel ends without optimism or redemption. Gratz in a section of the "Author's Note" titled "What You Can Do" asks readers to support refugees by donating to certain organizations such as Save the Children, and he explains what

[4] Margarete Rubrik in her article "Transcultural Studies and Novels for Young Readers: The Refugee Experience in Alan Gratz's *Refugee* and Gillian Cross' *After Tomorrow*" points out three mistakes, two of which I can refute. She states that Gratz uses erroneous German in one instance—"komm hier"—though as a native speaker I think that this phrase is accurate, yet possibly not the most common way of asking someone to come over to the speaker (*Refugee* 316). Rubrik's other concern is that Mohammed would not have understood Ruthie since he does not speak German. However, a translator is mentioned twice within that conversation, and this translator probably rendered Ruthie's German words into Arabic (*Refugee* 314, 316). On the other hand, I would concur with Rubrik's finding of the third mistake: Hungary is grouped with Germany and Sweden as one of the countries to have accepted refugees voluntarily, though Gratz states within the same paragraph that Hungary built fences to keep out refugees (*Refugee* 334). Furthermore, Hungary is severely criticized for its treatments of the refugees within the novel.

services these organizations provide (336-338). Evelyn Arizpe, an education scholar with an interest in intercultural literacy, astutely notices however that "Gratz misses the chance to suggest how readers could engage with more local and direct action or to point to steps they could take in their schools and communities" (Review of *Refugee* 132). She recommends, for example, greeting others in their native tongue and including displaced people and migrants from Latin American countries in the same categories to help and welcome (132). On the other hand, Arizpe in her review also points out that "when moments of crisis occur, in each story, the children suddenly find the courage and stamina to take actions that put them in charge, even if only for that moment, and these acts of agency have consequences for the rest of their own and others' lives" (131). I, too, would stress that Gratz does not dwell on the refugees as victims, and it is in the moments of great agency that his characters shine, which might likewise explain this rather hopeful ending—a transformation from refugee victim to a resilient survivor with hope and a plan for the future.

Mahmoud is forced throughout their ordeal to make individual choices, and each time they are for the benefit of his family or group. Convincing strangers to take his drowning baby sister is the hardest of his decisions, leaving him filled with survivor's guilt and questioning his actions over and over again. However, shortly after he hands Hana into (hopefully) safe arms, Mahmoud finds a lifejacket on a dead floating body and manages to place it on his mother, whose despair over losing Hana has made her temporarily incompetent to fulfill her role as a capable adult. While Mahmoud takes the lifejacket, he humbly recites a prayer for the deceased man, feeling guilty that now this corpse will float to the bottom of the sea and not receive a proper burial. Mahmoud is

from a religious family, and his faith has provided him and his loved ones with support and comfort. At the same time, Mahmoud recognizes that his faith makes others feel uneasy about him and other Islamic refugees. While on a ferry, Mahmoud and others were prostrate in prayer and though he "was supposed to be focused only on his prayer. But he couldn't help notice the uneasy looks the tourists were giving them. The frowns of displeasure" (*Refugee* 213). He suddenly has the realization that he and others like him become only visible to the world "*when we do something they don't want us to do . . .* When they stayed where they were supposed to be—in the ruins of Aleppo or behind the fences of a refugee camp—people could forget about them" (214, emphasis in original). He starts to question if his invisibility, which had been a lifesaving skill in a war-torn country, might be an obstacle now.

These internal questions lead Mahmoud to make a monumental decision when he resolves to stage a walk-out from a Hungarian detention camp while representatives of a United Nations organization come to observe the living conditions of the refugees. Mahmoud's agency places him, his family, and all other refugees in the camp back on their journey to Austria, and then Germany. Furthermore, it returns his family to life from their brokenness and inertia. They had given up, but Mahmoud's choice to stand up for their freedom revives them. These grand moments—of sacrifice and agency—make Gratz's work truly a masterpiece and explain the book's popularity. *Refugee* was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for over a year and received, for example, the Sidney Taylor Book Award, the National Jewish Book Award, and was number nine on the Children's Bestsellers list in July 2018 (Rubik 12; Juris 14). Gratz is a popular writer, specifically for middle graders, and the reviews for *Refugee* can be summed up by

Patricia Feriano's statement: "Gratz, who is known for well-written and well-researched historical fiction, doesn't disappoint" (72). In his own words, he states that his aim when writing any book is to "grab you by the lapels and won't let you go," and he sees his novels as "social thrillers" with the moral obligation to be true to the events and the people who suffered through them, and without using graphic descriptions of the horrors (Grochowski, "Q & A with Alan Gratz" np). Gratz's self-proclaimed duty to be accurate makes his three narratives distinct from each other, and as Margarete Rubik in her article "Refugee Experience in Alan Gratz's *Refugee* and Gillian Cross' *After Tomorrow*" points out, "unlike many other children's books [with heroes], Gratz also does not employ first person narrative" but instead "the novel is a third person narrative using the three protagonists as focalisers and showing the events through their eyes" (16). He also avoids generalizations, stereotypes, and "consciously blurs the distinction between asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants, implying that such legal quibbles do not do justice to the problem" (Rubik 17).

Several of the reviews are written by middle-grade teachers, who taught or will be teaching *Refugee* in class, and who are interested in fostering empathy as part of their curriculum's goals. For example, one such teacher, Leslie Rowland, plans to roleplay with her students the voyage across the sea, by taping an outline of the boat's size on the floor and having the students sit in it like in an overcrowded boat, imagining how to use the restroom, where to store supplies and such (34). Other scholars interested in the role of education consider refugee novels as a medium to generate empathy in the classroom with the hope that Western students will then build a "rapport with foreigners, decrease prejudice, foster an understanding between cultures, motivate altruism and prosocial

behaviour, and encourage students to show solidarity towards marginalized and discriminated groups" (Rubik 6). Similarly, Terri Ratini in her review of *Refugee* asserts that empathy leads students to focus more on similarities and increases open-mindedness (98).

Evelyn Arizpe in her article "Migrant Shoes and Forced Walking in Children's Literature about Refugees: Material Testimony and Embodied Simulation" goes even further, listing empirical studies that show some "evidence which suggests that, with a mediating adult, it is possible [for children] to not only develop affective empathy but also emphatic concern to encourage social action" (1357). At the same time, Arizpe warns that much research is still needed to illustrate the connections between empathy and children's literature and, moreover, how this translates to real-world implications (1357). Arizpe's warnings are warranted, since some of the initial excitement about literature's ability to generate empathy has been refuted. However, what researchers feel comfortable stating at this point is that it seems that a "lifetime of reading" fosters what psychologists call a "theory-of-mind"—the ability to understand another human being's feelings and motivations and, therefore, develop empathy for their emotions and actions—and that people with "stronger theory-of-mind skills are more drawn to fiction" (Panero 52).[5] Well, is that not one of writers', educators', and scholars' goals anyways—to foster a lifetime of reading with a readership immersed in acknowledging our shared

[5] See Panero, Maria Eugenia, et al. "Does Reading a Single Passage of Literary Fiction Really Improve Theory of Mind? An Attempt at Replication" and David Kidd and Emanuele Castano's original article "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind" for a discussion on the ability of literature to create a "theory of mind" and generate empathy.

humanity? My impression has been that this is an aspect within the Syrian refugee novels for children and young adults, and one of the intentions of their authors.

Escape from Aleppo:

Another writer who aims to create empathy and a shared humanity, and who also enjoys writing for middle-graders, is N. H. Senzai. Senzai also incorporates heavy topics and focuses on immigration and refugee issues. Prior to her Syrian novel, *Escape from Aleppo*, Senzai "was on numerous state award lists and was an NPR Backseat Book Club Pick" for her book *Shooting Kabul* and "nominated for an Edgar Award" for the companion work, *Saving Kabul Corner* (*Escape from Aleppo* book inlay). Similar to Gratz's sentiments, Senzai states in her interview with Houtman that readers deserve the truth about the atrocities of war and complex socio-political issues and historical events. Furthermore, Senzai asserts that especially middle graders "still suspend belief and journey with you through a story—but they can smell a skunk a mile away" (Houtman np). However, "skunks" are the problem in Senzai's works. Some of the reviewers point out that at times her plot twists are unrealistic and her clunky resolutions get in the way of the narrative. This has also been my experience with *Escape from Aleppo*. If Gratz's intertwining of three stories seems a bit forced, Senzai's resolutions of conflicts and problems are downright improbable; for example, several times people and once a cat are lost amid the chaos of bombs and being chased, but somehow, they all manage to reunite again with the main protagonist.[6] Senzai also includes much background information

[6] In one of these instances, Nadia's family cat runs away and Ammo Mazen knows where to find her. She is with Alaa, the famous Cat Man of Aleppo (discussed in the previous chapter). However, if the reader does not know the story of Alaa, then the incident is just

about the Syrian culture embedded in at times artificial-sounding conversations between the characters. Furthermore, the heroine's changes from a superficial to a mature, compassionate teenager by the end of her escape to the border appear rather swift at times.

Escape from Aleppo is the story of Nadia, told in third-person perspective with her as the focal point. She is a typical twelve-year-old, who enjoys frivolous soap operas, nail polish, hanging out with friends and gossiping when the Arab Spring begins. Starting in medias res, almost three years after the Arab Spring erupts, the reader is told that after her bomb injuries, she is traumatized and requires a family member to coax her out of the home while the family is attempting to flee new bombs. In the confusion of the escape, she is left behind and believed to be dead under the rubble. She recovers from her initial shock and crosses through Aleppo, her hometown, to get to the Turkish border—where her father is waiting to reunite with the rest of the family. Through flashbacks, Nadia informs the reader about her normal teenage life before the war, but also the realities of living under a dictatorship and the extreme changes when the Syrian war began. On her journey through the city, she meets a mysterious and very resourceful older gentleman, Ammo Mazen, who helps her navigate Aleppo and from whom she learns about the complex history of the city as well as Syria's at large. Nadia and Ammo Mazen pick up two orphaned boys on their way to the border, and their stories become enmeshed with theirs. The ending is bitter-sweet—Nadia and the boys make it to the border, and she

---

another occurrence in the novel. Senzai also does not provide further information about the Cat Man in her "Author's Note," which seems to me a missed opportunity.

spots her father, but Ammo Mazen is left behind and departs on his dying bed from his three foundlings.

Despite the already mentioned "skunks," or what I would call narrative glitches, Senzai portrays well-rounded characters who are able to grow through their experiences, a sort of "maturation by fire" as Wesley Jacques calls it in his review (262). Nadia's story in particular could be read as a Bildungsroman—the shallow teenager who manages her war trauma and turns into an empathetic young adult. Though I criticized the speed of Nadia's transformation earlier, I am aware that trauma could accelerate emotional development. Regardless of what one thinks of the speed of the changes, the maturation itself is realistically portrayed and seems congruent with the protagonist. Besides, the author conveys the richness of the Syrian culture, the country's previous beauty, the importance of cultural, historical, and artifact preservation (through an interesting side story), the reasons of the conflict, and the capacity for kindness to alter a harsh reality. In addition, Senzai circumvents binaries by intertwining diplomatically some of Syrians' complicity in the Assad regime, while at the same time demonstrating that not all regime members (or even ISIS followers) are evil. There is also an "Author's Note" with some additional information and a "Reading Group Guide" with some insightful questions at the end of the novel. Furthermore, through the flashbacks, Senzai illustrates to the reader that Nadia and her relatives had a normal life and were embedded in a modern family. They lived as an extended family and supported each other lovingly. One of Nadia's cousins is a veterinarian and wife, and one of the aunts is a physician who performs emergency surgery on Nadia on the dining room table, saving her leg by removing most of the shrapnel after the initial bomb explosions. Senzai stresses to readers that these are

contemporary women living ordinary lives when the war devastates their existence and turns them into refugees.

Moreover, Senzai succeeds in portraying the multiple manifestations of trauma. Through her flight, Nadia continuously deals with her PTSD from the barrel bomb injury; she is at times crippled physically as well as emotionally. Besides walking with a limp and experiencing constant pain, she has immobilizing panic attacks. Likewise, when Nadia's family recovers the body of her tortured and killed uncle, the whole family is affected. The grandfather has a stroke, the grandmother's hair turns white, and the aunt becomes mute. After the grandfather dies from his stroke, leaving the grandmother as the matriarch of the family, the other male members of the family ask her permission to join the Free Army forces. She reluctantly agrees, understanding that this is their form of agency, and of asserting their love for their country and its people. Moreover, the destruction of the city is also portrayed as a form of trauma; buildings are "scarred" and "unrecognizable" (45). People, too, go through a traumatic transformation. Nadia, who was once beautiful and compared to Carmen, an *Arab Idol* singer, has "hallowed cheeks marked with pale white scars," and "her hair, once thick and wavy, had been cut off because of lice" (37). The once-pampered young girl has turned into a starving teenager, desperate and traumatized just like everyone else around her.

In contrast, when Nadia takes charge during the escape, maneuvering the little group through the city, she copes with her fears and panic attacks and demonstrates great resourcefulness and agency. Some of these instances are small, little moments in which she overcomes her selfishness, for example when she does not abandon the others at a

time of convenience. Instead, Nadia switches from her internal monologue of self-pity and excuses to one of action "filled with resolve" (194). Another time, she skillfully assesses the situation in terms of visibility and uses a "sooty" sheet to hide herself and Basel, one of the orphaned boys (248). Other moments are more blatant, especially when she makes a concoction of phosphate and sugar, an experiment she had seen her brother perform before, and succeeds in freeing Ammo Mazen's donkey from a group of thugs. Tarek, the older of the orphaned boys, approximately Nadia's age, suggests to pray (he is deeply religious), but Nadia decides to use a ruse instead that makes the thugs believe they are being attacked by some supernatural being. They run away, and the three kids recover Ammo Mazen's donkey with the attached cart. Nadia and the two boys are too busy fleeing the scene and moving on before they are discovered; therefore, they are not able truly to celebrate their victory. Nevertheless, it is clear to the reader that all three, but Nadia in particular since she came up with the plan, should feel rightfully satisfied with their bravery, smarts, and resourcefulness.

However, it is in the quiet moments of the novel that the protagonists truly shine. Tarek, who had been left for unknown reasons in an orphanage at age five, and who continues to believe that his mother will come back for him, shows Nadia the importance of appreciating a loving family. While the three of them in the last stretch of their journey rest in the middle of ancient ruins, Nadia becomes saddened with the memories of her family's former picnics. They used to come to these specific ruins and eat, play, and enjoy each other's company. While Nadia loses herself in her own misery, Tarek notes with a contemplative look, "What wonderful memories you have" (297). Realizing her blessings, "Startled, Nadia looked at him. 'Yes, I do have those"' (297). Also, when

Nadia has a religious crisis in the middle of her escape, feeling abandoned by God or perhaps even punished, her companions remind her of Allah's qualities of "compassion and mercy" and they urge her "to choose mercy and compassion, or be lost in a sea of inhumanity" (242, 243). It is, certainly, compassion and mercy that Nadia chooses through her escape. She becomes more caring, both for the animals, which she originally did not like, as well as for the orphaned, lost boys who require extra kindness. Ultimately, Nadia's escape is outwardly a journey through her hometown, where she learns about her cultural heritage, but at the same time an expedition inward—by losing her family (some permanently, others temporarily), by losing some of her physical abilities through her injuries, by constantly coping with her PTSD, by relying on her wits to complete the flight—she finds her true self, her strength, her agency, and ultimately her humanity.

I started this chapter with a poem that ends with "Alive at last,/ and we still fall into the sea," implying that a refugee's journey is not over after finding safety, and dealing with the trauma seems ceaseless. Senzai published another work that addresses the issues of resettlement, ongoing PTSD, and therapeutic treatment of panic attacks, assimilation, and racism in the host country. The novel, *Flying over Water*, written in collaboration with Shannon Hitchcock, though with different characters, picks up several of the themes from *Escape from Aleppo*, and focuses intensely on the emotional aftermath of tragedies, but also on agency and methods to heal, or rather manage, traumatic symptoms. A few other authors describe the lives of the Syrian refugees in both refugee camps and host countries. However, since those two places—refugee camps and host countries—are quite different, I will discuss them in two separate chapters to follow.

CHAPTER THREE

RESETTLEMENT, PART ONE: SYRIAN REFUGEES' LIVES IN CAMPS AND URBAN CENTERS

> Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.
>
> (Said, "Reflections on Exile" 173).

> To become a refugee, to leave the place of your birth, break with your culture and history, is like ripping away half of yourself. But we had to find a place where you, our children, would be safe and have a future.
>
> (*Flying over Water*, 215)

> The concept of 'refugee' is a legal notion of the 20th century, established in the United Nations' *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* on 28th July 1951, in the climate of the Cold War. This Convention was the first in a series of human rights treaties that transcribed the ideals of the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* into legally binding obligations for the legal systems of signatory states. The *Universal Declaration* was the product of a historical period of deep and upsetting turmoil following two world wars and the appalling tragedy of the Holocaust. The *Convention* was initially intended to protect European refugees (during the Cold War, in fact, refugees were largely perceived as the direct or indirect result of the East-West stand-off), and then expanded to a wider scope, removing geographical and time limits, in the 1967 *Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*. According to Article 1 of the *Convention*, a refugee is:
>
> a person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reason of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him/herself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such a fear, is unwilling to return to it … (United Nations, 1951)
>
> (Luci, "Displacement as Trauma and Trauma as Displacement in the Experience of Refugees" 261)

In her article "Reframing the Refugee Crisis: From Rescue to Interconnection," Serena Parekh points out that the original aims of the United Nations Refugee Convention were to provide three swift, dignified solutions to refugees: resettlement to a third country, repatriation their home country, or integration into their host country (25). However, as she explains, Western states are not obligated to resettle refugees and decide resettlement cases at their discretion (22). At the same time, states are beholden to keep within their borders refugees who claim that they have a fear of persecution ("norm of non-refoulement") (22). According to Parekh, this has caused Western states to prevent refugees from entering their countries while simultaneously supporting measures such as refugee camps that keep refugees in the Global South (22). These policies have therefore ensured that "only about 1% of refugees will be resettled in a given year, 2% will be able to return home, and the vast majority will spend on average 17 years as a refugee either in a camp" or as an urban destitute (Parekh 22). She further explains that in order to seek asylum in Western countries, the 10% of refugees who make it that far jeopardize their lives, endure detention centers, and deplete their life savings (22).

Consequently, Parekh calls attention to these practices in her article and titles them "secondary harms" inflicted by Western states, who are perpetuating the refugee trauma. She also describes the terrible conditions in the refugee camps, which include abuse, "enforced idleness and diminished autonomy," lack of hope for a better future—a reality for 50% of refugees—in a system that is "both inhumane and expensive" (25-26). In her book, *Refugees and the Ethics of Forced Displacement*, Parekh elucidates that this issue is often referred to as "encampment" or "warehousing," a method that denies refugees rights to work, to move freely within the country, or to own property or a

business (2, 4). Many refugees decline to live under such conditions and attempt to survive in urban centers, a choice that removes them from UN or NGO assistance, often leading to more impoverishment and child labor (26). Refugees who survive the perilous journey to Western states find themselves in reception or detention centers, frequently places that are just as atrocious as refugee camps in the Global South (27). Though Parekh's concerns are primarily with the "ethics of admission," questioning the moral obligations Western states have to provide asylum and to find better solutions for "warehoused" refugees, she stresses that solutions must account for the dignity and agency of refugees (*Refugees and the Ethics of Forced Displacement* 5, 144). She calls these solutions "ethics of the temporary" and urges for swifter and more humane strategies to house refugees in suitable provisional placements until they can return to their home country or seek asylum (137). Furthermore, she suggests that refugees need to be integrated into the host country through work and education (142). Of course, this would imply a willingness from the Global South as well as Western states to acknowledge their failed strategies and contributions to an undignified life in encampment and to possess the goodwill to change the existing conditions as well as the political perspectives on refugees.

However, as outlined by Parekh and others, these strategies to keep refugees out of Western states are attached to a lingo to incite racism and are part of centuries old prejudices and decades of exclusionary practices.[1] In an ironic twist of words

[1] The edited work by Manata Hashemi and Martín Sánchez-Jankowski, *Children in Crisis: Ethnographic Studies in International Contexts*, addresses the refugee trauma as experienced in camps and some of the broader political contexts. Additionally, Man Xu articulates in the article "Constructing the Refugee: Comparison between Newspaper

(considering the perils associated with refugee flight and the ocean), critics have noticed that the media uses metaphors of water to describe the so-called "refugee crisis." In their article "Representing the "European Refugee Crisis" in Germany and Beyond: Deservingness and Difference, Life and Death," Holmes and Castañeda call attention to the representation of refugees as a "criminal/terrorist" threat, and a portrayal of the religiously other, which poses as a cultural danger to Christian nations (18). This refugee threat is depicted, for example, as a "flood," "tide," "flow," "the tip of the iceberg," and "that the unspecified European mainstream could be 'overwhelmed' or 'inundated,' and 'drown' as a consequence" (18). In contrast, liberal media tends to represent refugees deserving of empathy and support by attempting to humanize them through their stories. However, these depictions often perpetuate the stereotypes of the victim image, and deprive refugees of their agency.

These negative portrayals make the focus on agency in the lives of refugees real and imagined all the more crucial. At the same time, a genuine portrayal of refugee camps and urban destitution, with their perpetuation of trauma and deprivations is critical to the continuation of empathy and the need to implement positive changes. Many of the books referred to in this dissertation address some aspects of refugee camps, and a few also discuss the difficulties that Syrian refugees face in urban centers. Life in a refugee

---

Coverage of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Canada and the UK" the perpetuation on the focus of misery by liberal media, which "reproduces the racialized image of refugees as victims without agency and strips the life stories of refugees of their rich, complex pre-conflict history" (674). See also Nasia Anam's article "Encampment as Colonization: Theorizing the Representation of Refugee Space," in which the author analyses adult "literary and theatrical representations of the spaces where movement for refugees seeking asylum is stalled, and where otherwise temporary waystations start to function as full-fledged settlements" (406).

camp with its "secondary harm" and persistent problems is penetratingly depicted in both graphic novels discussed previously, *Escape from Syria* by Samya Kallub and *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees* by Don Brown. Also, as noted before, both writers have very distinct styles to convey the situation for Syrian refugees. Kullab focuses mainly on the fictional account of Amina and her family, whereas Brown intertwines real names with anonymous characters, without a detailed portrayal of individuals' circumstances.

Escape from Syria and *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees*:

In Kullab's work the container camp in Bekaa Valley, Lebanon in which Amina and her family are situated, is shown in muted grays and ochre browns with idle men sitting in front of their dwellings, looking subdued and pensive (26). Inside the container, the family is struggling to keep out the wind and cold; the father uses tape to fix the tent-like walls, and the family members are huddled together in front of a small stove (33, 50). The dangers within the camp are revealed when the father is beaten up by the smugglers for late payments, and when Amina's mother worries about her daughter sitting in front of their container (68-69, 27). This maternal fear also leads the parents to propose early marriage to Amina when they find out that Amina's thirteen-year-old friend is getting wedded as a strategy to protect the girl from possible sexual exploitations in the camp (72-73). These issues are further explained and supplemented with photographs as well as text in the author's "Endnotes." Though the illustrations in the graphic novel powerfully depict the situation, some of the photographs in the "Endnotes" are even more piercing and provide the reader with further arresting visuals, such as a barefoot child carried by

her mother, who is gingerly walking on a thick layer of snow and ice through the refugee camp—the very camp described in *Escape from Syria* (90).

Don Brown's graphic novel likewise portrays the terrible conditions in refugee camps in similar somber colors but at times with even more bleakness, including statements from low-spirited characters narrating the situation, and striking illustrations. He also zooms in on the different countries and their specific refugee camp situations. Turkey's camps are portrayed the most positively, with container trailers and some amenities (*The Unwanted* 56). Nonetheless, Brown tells the readers that "It's better than living out in the open, but the spare dwellings might be all they will know from now on" (56). This statement is supplemented with drawings of sad and despairing faces and a young boy holding on to the camp's wire fence while gloomily looking into the distance (57). In Greece the refugee situation seems even more desperate, and the government even less prepared to accommodate the influx of people. Here the camps are often merely makeshift tents with poor provisions (76-77). People are not legally allowed to work, making them restless and bored (82). Additionally, the infrastructure is falling apart, leaving mounds of garbage uncollected, which attracts rats and, therefore, (venomous) snakes (83). In Lebanon, the shortage of water and lack of government assistance places thousands of Syrian refugees in desperate conditions (82). One of the Jordanian camps, Zaatari (also spelled at times Za'atari) becomes "Jordan's fourth largest 'city'" (55).

Urban destitution is also well portrayed in *The Unwanted*. Here, too, Brown, focuses on specific countries. He tells the reader that in Lebanon, since there are initially "no government-sanctioned camps," millions of Syrians try to eke out a living in slum-

like circumstances without proper amenities and terribly crowded conditions (48). Brown also addresses the exploitation of refugees for labor, especially children, and the gender equality of paying girls "half of the wages of boys" (52). The long, grueling hours of child labor and overcrowded living conditions in urban centers can likewise be found in Turkey, and Brown manages to illustrate the hardships and desperation there as well (58). Brown truly succeeds in depicting the mixture of forced idleness, labor exploitation, stricken poverty, and unsanitary conditions in heartbreaking illustrations. [2]

Then again, glimpses of agency and hope can be detected in small, but significant, moments even in the camps or the urban destitution; and here, too, Brown manages to be honest but also gingerly optimistic. Two of the last quotes by female characters express hope and agency. One woman, cradling her infant child, says: "You have to hold on to the dream of controlling your own destiny and building your life" (84). The other woman, while hanging laundry on a line outside, declares: "Syrians … are productive and hard workers and will be creative anywhere" (84). This productivity and ingenuity are, for example, demonstrated in the changes of Jordan's largest camp, Zaatari, through additions of improvised stores, such as groceries and clothing departments—all created by the (Syrian) refugees themselves (55). Furthermore, Brown shows the intertwined lives of Syrian families, who are willing to assist each other not only by working hard but also by providing emotional support. Such determination is portrayed by a family of four

[2] In the *Opposing Viewpoints* Series, the authors of the work on *Syria* argue that it is time to reevaluate the term "host country," since it seems to only apply to states with a government that invited refugees for resettlement, in contrast to countries, such as Jordan or Lebanon, which are inundated with refugees "without having been invited by those communities"; therefore, the writers state that terms "affected community" or "country of refuge" are more accurate (160, 162).

who tries multiple times to escape Syria into Jordan, and who manages to cross and stay eventually, and then after two years is resettled in the United States (89). Another story is of a teenage girl who, along with her two younger siblings, attempts multiple times to flee Syria through Turkey and ultimately succeed in reuniting with their mother in Denmark (86). Both families are shown to be physically close to each other, at times exchanging hugs and holding hands, demonstrating their emotive intimacy. As mentioned multiple times throughout my dissertation, this bond reflects what Cavazzoni considers relational agency.

Small indications of agency and hope can also be seen in Kallub's *Escape from Syria*. Since in this graphic novel the focus is primarily Amina's family, the relational agency is correspondingly expressed within her relationship to her kin. As stated before, though it warrants repetition since it is such an important point, Amina's family is incredibly kind and supportive of each other. Furthermore, they foster their daughter's educational ambitions and try to maintain her formal education for as long as they can afford it. Amina herself is keenly aware of the importance of education and puts great effort into succeeding academically. Another seemingly minor aspect of agency that could easily be missed is the family's small attempt to create its own personalized space within the confinements of its container housing—as demonstrated by the small patio-like area, lined by bricks outlining a rectangular space and two herbal plants (35).

These attempts at homemaking with a small outside plot are similarly discussed in scholarly articles, especially in regards to some of the eco aspects of refugee life and resettlement. Yasmine Shamma conducted interviews with Syrian refugees in Jordanian

camps in 2012, 2016, and again in 2018 (with some of the same people since they were still there). Her initial interest was domestic space, but she was made to change her focus since the Syrian women she spoke with preferred to talk about their "make-shift gardens" instead of their container homes ("'Heaven is Green': The Ecoglobalism of Refugee Desert Gardens" 324). Most of the refugees' gardening activities are illegal since Jordan has been struggling with water shortages, making the gardening an agential gesture as well as a subversive one (331). Shamma recognizes in her interviewees not only a defiant response to their situation, but also a mixture of resignation to the permanency of the camp as well as husbandry habits, the latter positively associated with Syria; for example, "streets" within the camps are named by writing the words on improvised signs, after Syrian flora that cannot survive in the Jordanian desert conditions (332).

My Beautiful Birds:

In the picture book, *My Beautiful Birds*, by Suzanne Del Rizzo, the change from temporary living conditions to permanent placement within a refugee camp is also signaled by the protagonists' choices to plant gardens and open little stores. *My Beautiful Birds* (words and illustrations by the author) is told in the first person by young Sami, who with his family and neighbors escapes Syria by foot to find a new home in a refugee camp. And while the others are adjusting to their new lives by opening a school for the children, planting a garden, and cooking traditional foods, he is stuck in his suffering and unable to forget his pet pigeons. Sami expresses typical symptoms of trauma, such as recurring images of the war; he keeps hearing the bombs in his head, loses his appetite, and loses interest in playing with the other children until one day a canary, a dove, a

pigeon, and a rose finch fly into the camp and Sami starts taking care of them, which frees him emotionally from his anguish, and Sami becomes once again a member of his community and is even able to welcome newcomers. Though Rizzo does not depict the horrors of refugee camps (such as child prostitution and human trafficking, or the horrible squalor), she still manages to convey that life in a camp even with beautiful birds is not easy, but that the inhabitants have agency to make their lives *easier* by seeking connections to each other and to the natural world.

My Beautiful Birds opens with Sami standing on his rooftop with his back to the reader, surrounded by five pigeons, one of which is sitting in his left hand, while he is looking across the rooftops of his neighborhood. The next page is a double spread in which his family and neighbors are climbing up a hill while in the background their village is burning to the ground. Sami is holding his father's hand, who verbally tries to reassure his son that the birds are okay and were themselves also able to flee. The next double spread reinforces the previous two images with Sami feeding and interacting with his birds on the left and fleeing with his family from a burning skyline on the right. When the family arrives—after their arduous journey, represented in three images on the left page—at the refugee camp, they are welcomed by "helpful hands" and the father's and mother's relief is visible on their tired faces (*My Beautiful Birds* np). The family then settles into camp life as the father "plants a garden. Neighbors open small shops. Mother cooks *makdous* and flat bread," and the children start attending a school at camp and play soccer at recess. However, Sami is shown drawn into himself, imagining his past interactions with his pigeons, declining to join the soccer games, and losing interest in his mother's cooking as well as school, which he used to like. Furthermore, as "a peaceful

hush settles across the vast sea of shelters," Sami is overcome by PTSD symptoms and continues to hear the bombs' booming in his head. Next, in a bird's-eye view, Rizzo shows the children at school painting, and Sami's paper starts with a blue pigeon that on the next double spread seems to be consumed by smoke. He tells the reader:

> One day we are given paints, paper, and brushes.
> I try to paint my beautiful birds, knowing each
> wispy feather by heart.
> But the wisps turn to black.
> Smokey paint smears from edge to edge,
> swallowing everything underneath. I tear
> my painting piece by piece. Smoky paint
> stains my hands and my clothes. My
> stained heart is torn to pieces too.
> Outside I run. I run to
> escape the smoke.

With the depiction of this scene Sami's healing begins. He finds himself on a sand dune, looking into the vastness of the desert with a beautiful sky that seems to have clouds in the shape of birds. He starts to imagine "fluffy cloud-pigeons" whenever he is overwhelmed by his trauma. On the next double spread, Sami is lying on the family's container roof while daydreaming of his birds, and suddenly, the aforementioned birds—a canary, a dove, a pigeon, and a rose finch—arrive. In the next double spread, once again through a bird's-eye view, the reader sees the birds encircling Sami while a seemingly third-person voice (the only time this occurs in the book that is otherwise clearly in first person) states that the birds, "Like feathered brushes [. . .] paint the sky with promise and the hope of peace." In the next eight pages, Sami becomes involved with his community again by collecting some food and nesting supplies for the birds, by painting a colorful kite with birds and "just one dab of black" in school and flying it with the other kids, and by painting a wall at school. At the end, he is emotionally capable to

greet an incoming girl, who, like him before, is fleeing the war and whose "eyes are brimming with tears for home." Sami smiles warmly at her and holds out his hands, which contain a rose finch, and the girl in a gesture of acceptance extends her hands to receive the bird.

The most significant scene to me in terms of agency and trauma's healing is one in which the father and Sami are sitting together on the roof of their container, looking over the camp, with the four birds flying and sitting with them, while Sami tells the reader: "On bad days they know what to say—*Chitter, chitter, cooo, cooo*—and what to do—nuzzle, nibble, cuddle…and when it is best just to be" (ellipses in original). Father and son are sitting next to each other, with Sami leaning on his dad; however, Sami has his hoodie pulled up and does not seem to speak or interact with his father. This is a quiet moment shared between the two and the birds, in which language is not needed, and both humans are comfortable in each other's company. Of course, this is in stark contrast to the loneliness Sami had been feeling prior to the appearance of the birds, where he is revealed alone on the roof or alone everywhere in the camp. The birds are able to re-connect him with his family and other refugees. At the same time, he tells us that there he still experiences "bad days," days that require silence and merely the touch of a loved one or the sounds of birds.

Suzanne Del Rizzo's use of "plasticine, polymer clay, and other mixed media to bring rich texture" to the illustrations is absolutely beautiful and unique, not only providing richness in colors but also dimensionality to the artwork (*My Beautiful Birds* book inlay). Nevertheless, Julia Smith offers a critical perspective in her review: "Del

Rizzo's depiction of life in the refugee camp seems a little too rosy, though an author's note provides information on the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis" (102).[3] This rosiness is due not only to the absence of squalor and physical suffering, but also to the color scheme. Rizzo utilizes a range of pink hues and other light, pastel colors. I would argue though that this is because, as a Susan Dove Lempke, another reviewer, states, "Beauty and sorrow sit side by side in this compassionate and age-appropriate depiction of contemporary refugee life" (68). Also, speaking of age, the book is recommended by some reviewers for children as young as four, and according to Kirsten Ferguson, the work is suggested by the publisher for children six to eight. However, I agree with Ferguson's assessment in her review that "While written in simple words, *My Beautiful Birds* is very poetic with a significant amount of depth and symbolism," and, therefore, requires a more mature readership (1). On the other hand, older readers (Ferguson proposes a range for kids eight to twelve) might find the book too simplistic in its plot line.

Del Rizzo already had a successful career as an illustrator when she published the acclaimed *My Beautiful Birds* (book inlay). The work grew in response to her children's questions about the Syrian war. She started researching online for "more kid-friendly resources" and found "a short article about a young boy who fled with his family to the Za'atari camp, where he encountered and began a friendship with an assortment of wild birds" (Oke 4). This true story became "the tiny spark" for her creation of *My Beautiful*

[3] Unfortunately, the "Author's note" does not specify the reasons for the Syrian war, but it does provide more information about the difficult lives of refugees in camps and the dangers they encounter while fleeing their homeland.

Birds. In her interview with Marylynn Miller Oke, Del Rizzo explains that beauty was a consideration from the beginning since she intended to showcase not only the hardships of their refugee lives, but also children's "capacity to be hopeful and to see the beauty around them, even during difficult circumstances" (4). Therefore, her juxtaposition of the "soft textures of the birds' feathers with the gritty desert sand" provides the jarring effect needed to demonstrate the exquisiteness and adversity found even in the grimmest places (Oke 6). Correspondingly, since Del Rizzo is interested in fostering empathy in children, "our leaders of tomorrow," she decided to incorporate children's universal interests such as animals and sports to focus on our shared humanity (Oke 4). Regardless of its shortcomings—for example, the lack of detailed discussion of the Syrian situation, the absence of true war horrors, and an ambiguity in regards to the readership's age— the work does not provide a redemptive ending. Sami and his family, as the story concludes, are still stuck in the camp, there are still "bad days," and more people are coming. Besides, I cannot imagine any reader not finding visual pleasure in Rizzo's illustrations. Like *Stepping Stones, My Beautiful Birds*' artistic qualities override most criticism and provide a true visual feast.

Welcome to Nowhere:

In contrast, Elizabeth Laird' *Welcome to Nowhere* contains a redemptive ending that makes a problematic work even more difficult. Laird is an acclaimed writer, a "multi-award-winning author of several much-loved children's books (*Welcome to Nowhere*, "About the Author" np). *Welcome to Nowhere* also contains several wonderful black and white drawings from Lucy Eldridge. Unfortunately, despite the drawings'

visual power, they do not outweigh some of the novel's shortcomings. However, when I researched reviews about all of the author's accessible works, two strong criticisms became apparent: Laird seems to prefer a happy ending (even to some tragic or implausible stories) and she at times utilizes predictable plots. On the other hand, all her works are lauded for portraying strong, individualized, diverse characters, nuanced political perspectives, and depictions of detailed hardships. These comments are also true of *Welcome to Nowhere*.

The fictional first-person story is about twelve-year-old Omar Hussein, who is not much interested in school or politics, but instead is already working on his budding business as a salesman by helping his cousin sell postcards to tourists in their beautiful hometown of Bosra, in southern Syria. His fifteen-year-old brother Musa has cerebral palsy, and though he is extremely smart, he is harassed at school by teachers (who have a hard time understanding him) and students alike. The oldest child (there are two siblings younger than Omar), is Eman (sixteen-years-old) who is very studious and dreams of going to college and becoming a teacher but whose aspirations are thwarted by her father's belief that women do not need higher education. When the war starts, Musa becomes involved with other teen activists by filming and posting on social media the revolutionary efforts and their quelling by the government. Omar reluctantly supports Musa despite his best efforts to remain nonpolitical. The family initially flees to the countryside to stay with relatives, where Omar is forced to help with his uncle's farm and, therefore, builds physical strength and some resiliency, which come in handy later when the family has to flee once again, this time to the Zaatari camp in Jordan (the place that welcomes you to "nowhere"). In the camp, Musa is once again bullied by children

but manages through his intellect to win them over and become their leader (some of the novel's most improbable and cheesy moments). The family receives an offer of resettlement in England due to the youngest child, a toddler, who requires a complicated heart surgery. The different side stories add much to the plot line; for example, the father, who originally worked for the government, goes back to Syria and gets killed while the family is in the refugee camp. There is also a complex narrative about the parents trying to marry Eman to some terrible man, and Musa, through his diligent research, is able to find out that the suitor had been convicted of rape previously, therefore, saving his sister from matrimony. The narrative ends with the three oldest siblings discussing their fears of a new life in Britain on the eve of their departure. Omar asks the other two if they think that they will all be "all right in Britain" and liked (329), to which he does not receive an answer. Instead, Laird states, addressing her audience directly in her "A Letter from the Author" following the novel that the future reception of Omar and his family in Britain will depend on the readers' kindness (np).

Laird's direct address to the readership is, as I have pointed out in my discussion of the other novels in this dissertation, rather typical of the authors of Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults. What is also characteristic is that Laird offers information on how young people (and adults) can help Syrian refugees. Like the other non-Syrian authors, Laird had been heartbroken by the media coverage of the Syrian war and the suffering of the refugees. She had had the opportunity to participate in writing workshops in Jordan and met many Syrian refugees, whose stories inspired her to write *Welcome to Nowhere*. Additionally, Laird had lived in Lebanon during the civil war, and she was, therefore, familiar with the devastations of a country and its people by military

conflict. She remains in contact with the teachers of the workshops and offers information on her website for readers to support Syrian refugees in Jordan ("A Letter from the Author" and "What Can You Do to Help?" in *Welcome to Nowhere* np).

Laird's interest in individuals is apparent in her detailed, nuanced portrayal of the characters. The protagonists are fleshed out well and seem like full-bodied personalities; and their struggles and conflicts are depicted realistically. Omar's interests in entrepreneurial work and his inter-familial conflicts are individualized and not reduced to ethnic stereotypes, nor are his moments of bravery reduced to child heroism. Even while narrating the novel from a first-person perspective, Omar is able to discern some of his own limitations and admits when he has misjudged others, for example, his brother's jealousy and his own shortcomings. Interestingly, much of the novel's conflicts are personal struggles within the family, such as sibling rivalry, and much of the narrator's inner dialogue is devoted to figuring out his position within his family. These are all positive aspects of the work, enticing readers to feel empathy for the protagonists. In regards to the origins of the war, the situation in Syria prior to the revolution, and the government's response to the citizens' desire for democracy, Laird provides comprehensive and historical background information that she organically weaves into the plotline. The author also manages well to represent the normal life of Syrians before the war and, therefore, humanizes them beyond the labels of a refugee.

Moreover, trauma and agency are well represented in *Welcome to Nowhere*. Omar and Musa experience the horror of soldiers firing at protesters (53, 55) and the shock of seeing tanks driving down their city's streets (91). The novel also discusses PTSD issues

such as the five-year-old's bed wetting (99), the narrator's nightmares (91), the family's sorrow of leaving with only a few meagre possessions (128), and the dangers of crossing checkpoints (185). Agency is most apparent when the young adults take charge of difficult situations. Omar saves Musa several times from bullies by either physically fighting them or verbally defending his brother, and a few times the two boys must make quick decisions to dodge government forces and find places to hide. However, the less obvious choices are more profound and have a lasting impact. One such decision is when Musa joins the youth movement to oppose the government, endangering himself and the whole family. On a positive note, Omar's sense of entrepreneurship helps him cope with the hard life in the refugee camp. He manages to start a small business selling batteries, while at the same time befriending the group of boys who had previously harassed him and Musa, therefore securing protection for himself, his brother, and his business. Simultaneously, Omar helps the group of boys with their ration cards and other administrative issues which their illiterate parents were not able to manage, thus securing friendships and goodwill for himself and his siblings.

Most importantly for this section of the dissertation, Laird captures successfully the living conditions in the refugee camps. Omar describes waiting in long lines to receive the first meal, another long line for vouchers for blankets and such, and then the pitiful tent, filled with desert sand and a few mattresses (215). Also, water tanks and distribution facilities are across the camp, as well as toilet facilities, whose filthiness is appalling (231, 218). The "family started falling apart" with the mother's constant crying, the father's switching back and forth from silence to anger, and the youngest son "join[ing] a gang of other six-year-olds," who with other gangs of boys without fathers or

brothers terrorized some members in the camp (221, 222). Omar also describes the deadening boredom that one feels in a refugee camp, and at the same time the despair resulting from feelings of uselessness and anonymity (215). Additionally, the family starts suffering in the cold months, when they "lay shivering under our thin UN blankets, even though we'd piled all our clothes on top of ourselves" (222). The family is not exactly starving, even though they obtain some vouchers, Omar notes that "there was never enough to make me feel full" (223). A few months into their camp life, Omar notices improvements in the refugee camp, such as the opening of little shops, and the family getting their own caravan (224). He thus astutely observes:

> You have to spend weeks living in a damp cold tent in the middle of the desert to realize how good it is to have four walls and a roof, a window and a door, even if the walls are made of PVC that drips with condensation, and there is only one room to share between seven people. (225)

What Omar initially does not recognize in his excitement for a bit more comfort is pointed out by Musa—the UN is making the camp permanent, which implies that the war will last for an indeterminate period—crushing Omar's hope for a return home to a normal life in Syria (229). However, he does not have a chance to dwell on these thoughts because the caravans do not have electricity, and he has to help Musa find a way to charge his laptop to stay informed about Syria's situation since "information was the most precious thing of all in the camp" (229). Connections, ingenuity, and agency are apparently also very valuable because they enable Omar to start his battery business and later gain an apprenticeship after his diligence is recognized by one of the shopkeepers.

As stated earlier, I struggle with the redemptive ending of *Welcome to Nowhere*, especially since the little girl's heart condition proves to be the ticket out of the refugee camp to London, England, for the entire family. However, my other issues with the book are the extremely negative portrayal of the father, who Laird seems to be putting forth as emblematic for Arabic patriarchy, and the mother's silent indifference but also complicity. The father, depicted as physically unattractive, and portrayed as a government follower and dictator at home, is conveniently killed, making it easier for the family to have a new start in the outwardly secular, patriarchy-free, modern Britain. The mother, who had been married at fifteen years of age, is, as a contrast to the father's personality, very sweet with her children and secretly supports their ambitions. Though, after the father's death, when her oldest son Musa asserts himself, she initially relinquishes control, but then within days, she seizes power and becomes the matriarch of the family, making decisions about her daughter's healthcare and the family's resettlement. The mother similarly had opposed her husband only once before when their children's lives were endangered in Bosra, and she had decided that the family should flee to her sister's house in the countryside. Yet, the mother does not oppose the father's wedding plans for their daughter, despite the daughter's protestations and the suitor's obvious creepiness (observed by all children and other characters, but disregarded by the parents).

Furthermore, Laird's decision to include a brother with cerebral palsy adds such a strong element to the novel that, midst issues of discrimination, ableism, and patriarchy, the true problem—fleeing Syria because of a civil war—gets watered down. However, I seem to find myself alone with this opinion since all the reviews for *Welcome to Nowhere*

I read have hailed Laird's ability to maneuver multiple issues within one novel. Simon Demetriou's praise is reflective of this perception:

> It should be clear that Laird is ambitious in this book. Life with a disability in a still intolerant society could be thematic material for an entire novel. So could the plight of women in a world where they are still treated as objects to be traded among men. So, of course, could the refugee experience itself. That *Welcome to Nowhere* manages to make its thematic weight subordinate to a well-told and moving story is testament to Laird's skill. (np)

Perhaps my issues with Laird's multitude of topics are compounded by the fact that she takes up the theme of patriarchy *once again* in her next novel about the Syrian war, *A House Without Walls*. Laird's second novel about the Syrian war was published in 2019, two years after *Welcome to Nowhere*. Though Laird states on her website that she wrote *A House Without Walls* to tell the story about the Syrian refugees who live outside of the camps, to be frank, this fictional work adds nothing of importance to the previous book in regards to the difficult life of refugees, and the plotline is outrageously improbable ("How I Came to Write the Book" np).[4]

[4] I would like to note here that the reviews are quite mixed. Kay Weisman sees Laird's "strength in her attention to intra-family relationships" and believes that the conclusion of the work "provides readers with a satisfying ending" (56). Whereas, I would argue that Laird seems to lose her story in the pettiness of conflicts within the intra-familial relationships and that the elaborate story about the twin and the deceased mother with its redemptive ending is a copout rather than a true dealing with the reality of refugee life. In contrast, the review of the book in *Kirkus* points out that Laird fails to provide cultural specificity and "describes characters and situations in ways that at times reinforce Western stereotypes" (np). Though my dissertation does not focus on race and ethnicity, I would like to stress here that the seemingly positive message of Omar's and Safiya's agency and resilience, and the difficulties experienced by Syrian refugees in camps and on the outskirts of towns are lost in both of Laird's works in her portrayal of overpowering negative stereotypes of Middle Eastern cultures.

A House Without Walls:

A House Without Walls is told from the first-person perspective of twelve-year-old Safiya, whose spoiled, affluent but normal life in Damascus had remained relatively unaffected by the war, until she is forced to flee with her fifteen-year-old brother Tareq and their father when a client of her father's law practice is pursued by the government's secret police. The three escape abruptly with only a bag for each person, and then the father's wallet is stolen as soon as they cross the border, leaving them penniless when they arrive at a distant relatives' house, a place on the outskirts of Azraq, Jordan. Their relatives, though polite and welcoming, live in modest circumstances and, therefore, after a few weeks Safiya's family moves into a tent next to their small house. Safiya's father, a brainy but impractical man, becomes rather helpless and depressed, unable to provide for the family. Tareq, Safiya's brother, resumes school but starts working full-time at a bottling plant to support the family. Safiya is unable to attend school and is expected to cook and clean for her family (something she was never taught before), as well as help her aunt with chores. The aunt is often cruel and condescending, but she does teach Safiya housekeeping skills and, therefore, ensures the improvement of their living conditions. The second intertwined plotline is the mystery about Safiya's mother's death and Safiya's twin sister, who had been adopted by relatives in the United States. Safiya manages to track down information on that part of the family, who happens to live in Jordan again, and she reunites with her twin sister Saba. Safiya and her brother find out after much prodding that their mother's postpartum depression had turned into a psychotic episode, and then she had been hit by a van when she had run across the street

in a careless moment. [5] Their father justifies the silence around the mother's death due to the taboo of discussing mental illness within the Syrian culture. The novel ends with the twin's adopted father (her maternal uncle) offering a new beginning for the family with an apartment in Amman, Jordan, and the prospect of Safiya going to Saba's international school.

The book starts in medias res with a direct address to the reader by Safiya listing her name, age, place of origin, gender, the flight to Jordan, that she has a lost twin and a deceased mother of unknown circumstance, and the fact that she is a refugee. Then the story continues in a chatty tone (which seems the tenor of the book in general); the reader is told immediately on the second page what it is like "being a Syrian girl":

> Boys can go where they like and do what they like, talk to anyone, walk to school on their own, meet up with friends in town. But girls have to stay at home. If I went even a little way from home on my own, my whole family would be shamed. It's just the way it is, but it doesn't mean that I like it, especially when Tariq or Auntie Shirin tell me off for silly things like not tying my hijab tightly enough, or laughing too loudly in front of people.
>
> And here is another thing about being a Syrian girl. You mustn't dream of ever disobeying your father. I mean *ever*. And that includes talking back to him. But no one can stop you saying things in your head! That's why I talk to myself all the time. (*A House Without Walls* 2)

I quote this lengthy passage to give a notion of the narrator's tone, her blasé treatment of subject matters, and the author's (should I say obsessive) interest in patriarchy and

---

[5] See the article "Mental Health and Psychosocial Needs of Syrian Refugees: A Literature Review and Future Directions" by Asli Cennet Yalim and Isok Kim, which describes the problems of administering mental health services for Syrian refugees due to logistics associated with urban destitution as well as the cultural stigma attached to receiving mental health care. Furthermore, the article discusses gender-based violence, child marriages, child prostitution, and discontinuation of education for children due to the conditions of camps and urban distribution of refugees.

feminism. Some of the critiques I made earlier—of Western's writers' representations of the Middle East—apply here as well. The work is a Bildungsroman and as such exemplifies the narrator's growth in her language as well as her actions. Also, though I understand that Laird is trying to convey Safiya's age level, I still find her childish narrative voice irritating, especially since it does not seem to change much even after she matures a bit. Safiya is portrayed as a reliable narrator, which makes it even more difficult for audiences to discern some facts from personal experiences (and in this case even fictional experiences). She is portraying herself as the spokesperson for all Syrian girls, which is absurd. Of course, there are "Syrian girls" who are criticized by their family for a slipping hijab or who are not allowed to walk alone anywhere. However, this is not the reality of all "Syrian girls." Here, I speak from experience and from the literature I read; for example, Yusra Mardini and her sister do not wear a hijab, they are allotted much personal freedom; they are even supported by their families to swim (in regular, professional swimwear), and so on. Furthermore, Safiya comes from a well-to-do background with a highly educated father, who opposes the regime. It seems rather unlikely that her family would espouse such conservative practices.

Moreover, the author, through the voices of secondary characters, addresses early marriages, in which girls fourteen and fifteen were wedded to (older) men. One of Safiya's cousins tells of his mother that she was "more or less sold to" her husband (96). The issue of girl brides is also used by Laird to explain the complicity of women in the patriarchal society. The perpetuation of this gender inequality is shown as a generational conflict, in which older women accept their fate and try to impose the same restrictions on the next age group of girls, almost in a spiteful act of misery likes company and lack

of imagination to change the world (71, 162). Again, this is true for some Syrian families; my own paternal grandmother was married as a teenager to a man old enough to be her father. However, Laird's generalization does injustice to the multitude of other realities. For example, several of my aunts and female cousins pursued higher education and worked outside the home. Other examples can be found in the literature as well, such as Bana Alabed's mother, who is a teacher and encourages her daughter's agency and future dreams outside of matrimony and childrearing. Laird's appropriation of Safiya's voice as an authentic representation of Syrian girls seems particularly troubling considering the author's Western background. Furthermore, I would think that perpetuating negative Middle Eastern stereotypes is contradictory in the aim to foster empathy for Syrian refugees.

In terms of agency, Safiya makes important decisions in three major areas: she becomes a good housekeeper and cook to support her family (initially forced, but then she takes pride in her work), she finds part-time office work in a beauty shop to make extra money and assert her independence, and she takes it upon herself to find her twin. Her process of beautifying their tent and improving their living conditions, for example by applying for rations from the UN and a heater from a refugee charity, demonstrates the difficult life the family experiences in their current situation. Laird shows the struggles Safiya undergoes as she moves from a life in comfort to managing daily life in a tent. At the same time, none of these problems are different from the family's struggles in her previous work, *Welcome to Nowhere*. Additionally, this novel lacks the previous work's portrayal of trauma. The fear of arrest and torture, the father's depression, the refugee camps nearby, and a cousin's mistreatment in the Syrian army are mentioned, but true

war trauma, as portrayed in Laird's preceding work, is entirely left out.[6] Interestingly, in both books, Laird also does not address past Western involvements in the region (for example, colonial and military interventions) that have contributed to the current situation and the lack of Western support for the Syrian revolution.

A Land of Permanent Goodbyes:

Considering all of Laird's shortcomings in both of her novels, I would like to end this chapter with a brief discussion of a work that *demonstrates well* the issues Syrian refugees encounter in urban centers and outside refugee camps: *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*—a book that also touches upon some of the problems of resettlement in a host country; therefore, I will begin the next chapter with it as well. In *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*, after a dangerous and heartbreaking journey, Tareq and his cousin, Musa, arrive in Istanbul where they try to figure out if they could make a living, while Tareq's father and little sister remain at the Turkish border. Tareq and Musa have similar experiences but find different ways of dealing with their new urban poverty. While both are exploited by their employers, Musa finds learning the Turkish language easier and is able to stand up to some of the mistreatment, and he eventually finds better work based on his improved language abilities. He also falls in love with another Syrian girl in "Little Syria," a section of Istanbul that is filled with Syrian shops and refugees (103). Tareq, on the other hand, struggles with poverty, the lack of social mobility, racism, sexual

[6] The few black-and-white, ink-wash-style illustrations by the same artist as before, Lucy Eldridge, only supplement the text and add no visual depth to the narrative. It is as if the illustrator's work in Laird's second novel addressing the Syrian war has also become more trivial.

exploitation of Syrian girls and woman around him—something he does not want his little sister to experience—and a lack of hope and optimism in general. He insists on leaving Turkey for Germany. For Tareq, Europe promises at least the hope of social mobility and a warm welcome.

Ending this chapter on another positive note, I would like to mention two psychosocial studies that have focused explicitly on Syrian refugee children living in camps and in urban destitution. Both studies focus specifically on Syrian youth and strategies that promote agency and voice, despite difficult living conditions in a refugee camp or a destitute urban environment. In Ersoy Erdemir's essay "Uncovering Community Wealth Through an Early Intervention Program: Syrian Refugee Children Speaking," the author argues against a deficit model and instead, mirroring Cavazzoni et al.'s findings, stresses that Syrian children are able to find strength in "social capital" such as their peer network in school and "family capital" demarcated through a "sense of connectedness to nuclear and extended family members" (there are wealth capitals identified, but these two are most relevant here) (266, 267). Moreover, Erdemir finds that children express their agency by performing chores and tasks to help their families at home, at work, as well as in the larger community (267). Erdemir's study focuses on five- to six-year-old Syrian refugee children from impoverished families, located in metropolitan Istanbul, without previous education, who attend a program to prepare them for elementary school (262). He concludes his article with recommendations for classroom practices for teachers within this particular program, as well as any elementary educators working with Syrian refugee children, to foster agency within the six cultural

wealth capitals identified (navigational, social, familial, linguistic, resistant, and aspirational).

Orna Braun-Lewensohn and Khaled Al-Sayed's study, as summarized in their article "Syrian Adolescent Refugees: How Do They Cope During Their Stay in Refugee Camps?" also offers policy recommendations to enhance agency, in addition to focusing on positive models of recognizing adolescents' potential versus their deficits. Though the two scholars found differences in gender, such as girls' increased vulnerability in refugee camps, and the significant impact of spending long periods in the camps for both genders, the influence of sense of coherence (SOC) dominated all other factors. The authors define the SOC as a perceived interpretation of "the internal and external resources one believes available for him/her to cope with stressor," which for teenagers "is the stability of the community," which "helps adolescents to perceive the world around them as predictable and manageable" (3). Braun-Lewensohn and Al-Sayed, therefore, recommend to include adolescents in "societal processes and feel that they have real potential to influence decisions regarding their lives" (8). Furthermore, the authors advocate for community-building workshops with the parents, in addition to policy changes that reduce the time youth refugees spend lingering hopelessly in camps, and instead find permanent resettlement that provide possibilities for an optimistic future (8).

Children's and young adults' types of agency in Erdemir's and Orna Braun-Lewenson and Khaled Al-Sayed's studies are reflected in the works I discussed in this chapter. Musa's ability to find connection to a Syrian community within "Little Syria" and his ability to create stability in his life increases his SOC. This is also true for the

main protagonists in both of Laird's works. Don Brown's characters demonstrate some of the SOC factors, as well as the community wealth addressed by Erdemir through chores that help the family, learning the host language, and meaningful connections to family members. These strategies for exercising agency are even more apparent in *Escape from Syria*, in which the protagonists work together as a familial unit to improve their lives, albeit making individual sacrifices. Correspondingly, once Suzanne Del Rizzo's main character reconnects with the birds, he manages to increase his SOC by rejoining his family and community, as well as display three of the cultural wealth capitals outlined by Orna Braun-Lewensohn and Khaled Al-Sayed's study—social, familial, and aspirational. In other words, Sami finds a sense of coherence that helps him cope with his internal as well as external stressors by spending time with his family in a loving way, contributing to his community by welcoming arriving refugees in a warm, and inclusive fashion and by expressing hope for a better future.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESETTLEMENT, PART 2: SYRIAN REFUGEES' LIVES IN THE HOST COUNTRIES

> *When Tareq finally reached Germany, no one was clapping*, there were no welcome signs at the train station, and no teddy bears were being distributed to small children. Those news clips were from a different time—even if that was just several months before they arrived.
>
> Smiles were replaced with suspicions. Especially after various traumatizing incidents in Europe—including the coordinated terror attacks in Paris that killed more than one hundred people and the horrendous reports of sexual assaults on New Year's Eve in various German cities.
>
> He no longer blamed them for being afraid, He shared their fear. He lived it.
>
> (*A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* 269)

As sobering as Tareq's new chapter in life sounds, he is able to work on a new beginning at a German government facility where he applies for asylum and reunification with his father and brother (though the reader does not find out if the reunification is successful). Tareq's little sister, Susan, is placed in a kindergarten and, as expected for children her age, she learns German quickly. However, Susan's continued PTSD symptoms manifest in vacillations from silence about their flight to bouts of tears, as well as the constant need of nightly comfort of a beloved doll (270-271).

The Girl from Aleppo:

Nujeen Mustafa's welcome to Germany was much warmer (as described in her memoir *The Girl from Aleppo*). She and her sister arrived on September 21, 2015, several months prior to the arrival of the fictious Tareq. People held welcome signs and passed out fruits to Nujeen and the other refugees (*The Girl from Aleppo* 212-215). However,

Mustafa likewise reports Germans' ambivalent response to the Syrian refugees. She writes about the violence against refugees after terrorist attacks, as well as the positive treatment from strangers (236-239). Mustafa also details how her neighbors called social services to complain about having refugees living next door and called the police with an unfounded noise grievance (234). Additionally, Mustafa lists the losses she and her family experience, the normalcy of her previous life, the heartbreak of some of her family being scattered all over the globe, and even missing the bright night stars of her home country (274, 234). She is grateful for the possibilities Germany is offering her and the safety in her new life, however the language barriers are great, and one of her sisters, who had worked hard for a law degree in Syria ("the first woman in our family to go to university"), finds her degree has no value in her new host country (234).

Yet, as mentioned in a previous chapter, Mustafa manages to become a spokesperson for refugees and particularly refugees with disabilities. Through her work as a refugee ambassador, she is able to voice not only her concerns, but also speak for those unable to bridge the silences (277). In addition, she starts recording anti-racism messages on *YouTube*; and despite her survivor's guilt, she embraces a normal teenage life in her new host country (226, 271). I mentioned Mustafa's similarities with Yusra Mardini's account before, and here again are some significant parallels. Mardini also manages to become a refugee ambassador and develops her agency as well as her voice after finding refuge in Germany (*Butterfly* 224-255). Similarly, like Mustafa, Mardini is lucky to arrive in Germany during the time when the German government and (most of) its people are hospitable to Syrian refugees. Mardini and her sister reach Germany on September 7, 2015, to a warm and generous welcome (194). The Mardini sisters manage

to get their parents to Germany through an excruciating path of red tape, uniting the nuclear family once again. But life is hard for them in their host country. Like Mustafa's family, Mardini's family struggles with the German language and the inability to find suitable work (279-280). Resettlement for the Mustafa and Mardini families provides a refuge free of war, starvation, and due to their stardom, many possibilities unknown for other refugees, and yet, *and yet,* they are homesick for their beloved country; they continue to grieve their lost family members; and reading their memoirs, one cannot fail to see their underlying feeling of being strangers in a strange land.

Here I would like to mention two articles that discuss ordinary—i.e. without Mustafa's and Mardini's celebrity status—refugees' agency and voices, who have devoted their attention on expressions of refugee protest and policies of agency in France and Germany, respectively. The first is Debarati Sanyal's article "Calais's 'Jungle': Refugees, Biopolitics, and the Arts of Resistance," in which she undertakes a complex analysis of the cinematic representations in a French documentary about the refugees' resistance to police brutality and state sanctions. Though Sanyal points out the stasis of camps, she also stresses the resistance techniques employed by refugees, such as "tactical visibility" to draw attention to their plight and "the traces of political subjects on the move" in places of immobility (23). The second scholar, Fazila Bhimji, also examines refugee resistance in her article "Visibility and the Politics of Space: Refugee Activism in Berlin," with a focus on places created by refugees as arenas of political engagement, such as "protest camps," where refugees stage demonstrations and camp-outs to demand changes in refugee laws, for example, the right to work and move freely within a country, as well as draw political attention to the link between European colonialism and the

refugee crisis (436-437). Interestingly, changes in technology have likewise allowed the refugees more voice and visibility, such as by giving a "press conference via mobile phone" while camped-out on a rooftop or *YouTube* uploads of personalized interviews from refugee activists (444, 447). Furthermore, as Bhimji explains, occupying space and using social media has led not only to visibility, but also to solidarity with other groups. The refugee activists have been joined by "supporters, who self-identified as students, artists, cultural workers, anarchists, and neighbors" and who themselves "became the subject of police and state control" through arrests and forced removals (448).

The topic of solidarity with the Syrian refugees looms large, as expressions of camaraderie, friendship, assistance, and kindness, are manifest in much of the literature that addresses resettlement. This is apparent in the autobiographical works, such as Alabed's support from Turkey to evacuate from Aleppo and find refuge, as well as Bassel Abou Fakher's help from Belgian friends to provide shelter for him and to reunite him with his beloved dog. Mardini tells how she received much care from Germans in her swimming community, which led to broader support and eventually her attendance at the Olympics as part of the Olympic Refugee Team. Likewise, Mustafa shares her experiences of solidarity that enabled her to become more independent as a person with physical disabilities and eventually to become a refugee ambassador. As previously mentioned, some writers have ended their fictional work by placing responsibility onto their readership to examine their conduct towards refugees, which becomes most apparent in school and social situations for children and young adults. Therefore, the subsequent works that I will discuss are fictional narratives that include the subject matter of solidarity, with its multitude of expressions, as a major topic within the Syrian refugee

literature for children and young adults. I will start with the least effective work and end my analysis with the books that are the more successful in their treatment of the Syrian refugees' situations in their host country and their resettlement efforts.

Yara, My Friend from Syria:

The self-published work, *Yara, My Friend from Syria*, by Alhan Rahimi with illustrations by Anahit Aleksanyan, is not only the least refined in terms of storytelling of all the works on Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults, but also the poorest in terms of illustrations. Rahimi, who is not a native English speaker, could have benefited from a good editor to smooth out some of the grammatical errors and awkward sentences. The cartoonish faces with their large eyes and limited range of expressions reflect similarly the author's restricted choices of narration. The story, told in third-person, with an emphasis on three characters, Oliver, Angela, and Yara, is about Yara's first day in her Canadian school. She is introduced mid-lecture by the principal (Mr. Maxwell) to Mrs. Smith's class (really, Rahimi could not find more common names?!). After class, Angela and Oliver, two classmates, take it upon themselves to greet her, but when Oliver offers Yara an apple, she begins to cry. The reader is then told how Yara was reminded of her apple tree in her family's front yard, where the family took their afternoon coffee, and the neighborhood children played with her. When the family is forced to leave abruptly in the middle of the night, with only a couple of suitcases for the entire family, Yara embraces the apple tree and takes a few leaves with her. The story ends with her showing the dried apple leaves to her puzzled new friends, who decide to find out more about Yara once her English improves.

Rahimi sentimentalizes Yara's life in Syria as well as idealizes the Canadian reception she receives in her classroom. It is as if Yara's happy friends from Syria are replaced by kind and generous new Canadian friends. The only redeeming quality of the work is Oliver's thoughts about Yara's possible difficulties in her new life, how "everything must be new to her. A new school, new classmates, new teachers, new language, new house [which is an assumption on his part, she could be living in an apartment or refugee housing] and a new COUNTRY!" (np). However, these statements are lessened in import considering that they are not from Yara herself, and they lack any true insight into her current situation or past life. Moreover, neither the narrative voice, nor Yara's, nor Angela's or Oliver's thoughts reflect on the war trauma. It is as if Yara had been whisked away from some random war to start a new life in a safe, Canadian embrace. The children's agency in showing their kindness to her, and in response Yara's warm reception of them, is also lessened by the lack of any conflict. Oliver and Angela are the posterchildren for a welcoming host country. Simultaneously, Yara makes her welcome easy by looking as non-Middle Eastern as her Canadian classmates. There is no hijab or anything else "othering" Yara and her family for that matter, making her transition to this seemingly wonderful place rather unrealistically seamless.

Of course, like all authors discussed before her, Rahimi's purposes in writing the book, as mentioned in her interview with Stephanie Johnson for the *Parry Sound North Star*, were honorable, and her aim was to showcase the hardships of leaving everything behind with only a few possessions and to foster empathy, as evidenced by Oliver's internal monologue (1). However, the author's generalized dedication at the beginning of the little book indicates the larger problems with this work: "Dedicated to every child

who had to endure hardships!" (exclamation point in original, np). Though Rahimi tries to include some supposedly specific details about Syria (the family drank "Turkish coffee," and the children and adults did a "dabke" dance around the apple tree at times), the story falls short of appearing country specific, especially since the political situation is entirely left out. Yara is told *much after* the family's rushed departure that they had to leave because "war had started in her country and it was not safe to be there anymore" (np). It seems astonishing to me that a child who was reading about Newtonian laws of gravity under the apple tree (Rahimi's clumsy attempt to include a funny story of a fallen apple), would be unaware of a war in her *own* country. Rahimi explains in her interview for CTV News Channel that she wrote the work with Canadian parents and their children in mind so that her book would open a chance for them to engage in dialogue about Syria's war. Likewise, she intends for parents and educators to discuss the war, and not the work itself, since she considers her book for children as young as three years of age (np). Yet, considering the amount of text, the targeted audience seems older to me; besides, if Syrian children can handle surviving the war or leaving their war-torn home country, then Canadian kids should be able to read about it in a more appropriate and comprehensive way.

The Boy at the Back of the Class:

As expected, *Yara, My Friend from Syria* ends on a positive note; all three children are excited to become friends. This tendency for a redemptive ending seems to be particularly typical for works set in host countries. Some of these have rather improbable plot lines, for example Onjali Q. Raúf's fictional work, *The Boy at the Back*

of the Class, narrated in first-person from the perspective of a classmate of the refugee Ahmet. Set in London, the narrator Alexa and her multiracial group of outcasts help Ahmet find his parents and a place to call home. Though the work is often unrealistic (they get invited for tea by the Queen!), one-dimensional in some of its representation of good and bad people, and heavy handed in its deployments of every imaginable stereotype, such as how the narrator is gender non-conforming from a Jewish *and* Indonesian family. Still, Raúf illustrates the horrors of the war by including a small description of the drowning of Ahmet's sister in the sea crossing and the death of his cat during their strenuous journey over the mountains. Additionally, the author emphasizes the importance of recovery needed to deal with such tragedies by addressing the fact that Ahmet goes to therapy. Moreover, Raúf is able to convey with humor and kindness the importance of empathy and connectedness needed to help a young refugee. Thus, when Ahmet uses his agency, he is able to process some of his trauma further. He physically defends himself against the class bully and, despite his emergent popularity, remains a faithful friend to the little group of outcasts (*The Boy at the Back of the Class* 91). Ahmet chooses to interact with others, decides who his friends are and will be, and more importantly, elects to participate in normal life activities again, for instance, by playing soccer (57, 240). Through all these choices and connections with others, the shy, traumatized young boy turns gradually and carefully into a kid with hope and a future. Raúf also provides an addendum about the current refugee situation, opportunities to help, and questions to ponder, as well as an author's note explaining her interest in the subject (the famous picture of Alan Kurdi which inspired her to go to the nearest refugee

camp and to write the book), while age-appropriately addressing some of the social and political issues regarding refugees.

The book has been a favorite with middle graders. Coco Khan in an interview with the author for *The Guardian* stresses the work's successes, mentioning awards such as the Waterstones Children's Book prize and Blue Peter Book prize, as well as the nomination for the Jhalak prize, "a watershed moment," since "British writers of colour" [BAME] only comprise "less than 2% of children's authors" and "only 1% of children's books have lead BAME characters" (np). In the interview, Raúf recalls how her own father and other relatives tried to discourage her aspirations of becoming a writer and rather pressed her to be married instead. Though her mother was skeptical that Raúf could succeed in a White publishing world, she encouraged her daughter's dreams and supported her daily library visits and expansive readings (np). Raúf, therefore, sees her debut novel, *The Boy at the Back of the Class,* as her mother's progeny as much as her own (Khan np). Khan describes the author as "warm, fast-talking and infectiously positive," attributes that could also be applied to the actual novel with its friendly characters, fast paced plot line, and exceedingly positive ending (np). Perhaps these features explain the book's popularity, though I struggle with the redemptive ending for both Ahmet and his classmates. Ahmet's parents are found and they obtain asylum in Britain. The group of outcasts, including the narrator, receives a formal invitation to visit the Queen of England.[1]

[1] Raúl wrote a sequel, *The Day We Met the Queen*, for the World Book Day. In an interview with Fiona Noble for *The Bookseller,* Raúl stated that she focuses in her sequel further on societal issues regarding the refugee crisis in Europe, political discussions

On the other hand, the simplistic drawings by Pippa Curnick, which are denoted in the text as illustrations by the characters to enhance some of the narrative, add much nuance to the work in their naïve expressions, especially when they are depicting traumatizing scenes. In contrast, at times the drawings are more sophisticated, as in when they show buildings or close-ups of some of the characters. This dichotomy adds to the experience of trauma as crippling and fundamentally primitive in its emotional expression. Ahmet, therefore, mostly portrayed through the words of the narrator, expresses some of his voice through the visual depictions. His loving family, the terror of the war, the struggles during their flight, and his overall sorrow are described in the illustrations, and contrast his initial inability to speak due to the language barriers and his emotional trauma. At other times, Alexa's reflections of the artworks help readers decipher some of the silence and Ahmet's unspoken suffering. Besides, the drawings highlight some of the moments of agency, such as when the group of outcasts decide to contact the Queen, and add some light humor to moments of tension.

As mentioned before, in regards to agency, Ahmet resumes prior activities such as sports and academics, and he decides to stand up for himself against bullying and to create meaningful relationships. However, the narrator's actions are equally important within the novel. The most obvious decisions occur when Alexia and her group of friends attempt to contact the Queen of England for assistance to locate Ahmet's family and to

---

adults engage in, and the importance of children's involvement in the political arena (24). However, this very short novel (85 pages) magnifies her previous work's shortcomings: the plotline is once again extremely unrealistic with an improbable redeeming ending, the sweet moments and humor are exaggerated, the narrator's chatty tone is nearly unbearable, and the focus on refugee issues is so minimal to be almost negligible. The work also misses Pippa Curnick's compensatory drawings.

ensure their asylum. However, I find the subtler moments more realistic and profound. These are the times when Alexia and the others purposefully try to reach out to Ahmet while honoring his need for space and emotional healing. Likewise, when Alexia starts asking her mother questions about Syria, therefore demonstrating a true interest in Ahmet, her decision to find out more enables her to feel a closer connection to Ahmet and his plight. Alexia and her mother then go on a wild goose chase to find a pomegranate to gift to Ahmet. When they are finally successful—an episode that, typical for Raúf, includes another encounter with a benevolent person of color and historically non-British ethnicity (based on the description, my best guess would be a person perhaps of the Sikh religion)— Alexia manages to procure two pomegranates (79). She ceremoniously presents Ahmet with one of the pomegranates, and Alexia, her friends, and the reader, receive the desired effect from Ahmet, who, for the first time, smiles "a proper smile that went from one cheek to the other and that made his eyes smile" (85). The moment of connection is broken when the novel's bully unexpectantly snatches the fruit out of Ahmet's hands, leading to a fight in which Ahmet asserts his strength over the bully and consequently changes his social status within the school, becoming one of the popular kids.

This back and forth between emotional moments of connectivity and adventure are one of the hallmarks of the author's writing style. Perhaps, this too explains the book's popularity. Furthermore, as Raúl states in an interview with Fiona Noble for *The Bookseller*, schools have been including the novel within lesson plans, and librarians have used the work as a tool to discuss safely the refugee crisis with middle grade children. Both of these actions helped tremendously to increase the novel's popularity

(np). Despite the novel's shortcomings (unbelievable plot line, one-dimensional characters, chatty voice), the aforementioned author's warmth shines through her protagonists, even midst descriptions of trauma, making it easier for readers to process the suffering. Moreover, considering that Raúf herself experienced racism in her native England, "being called Paki," and a lack of representation of herself and others like her in the multitude of books she read, she decided to include characters of color in her own works (Khan np). I would conclude, therefore, that despite some of its failings, *The Boy at the Back of the Class* will provide young readers with an empathetic view of the Syrian refugees while balancing trauma, agency, and inclusivity with factual information as well as fictional adventure.

Nowhere Boy:

This conclusion can likewise apply to Katherine Marsh's *Nowhere Boy*, a work also with middle graders as its main audience. Though I must admit that until I started researching the work's reception, I had considered it was meant for an older, young adult readership. Marsh's book lacks Raúf's chattiness, and the adventure sequences are much more believable. The entire plotline is seemingly more credible, possibly because parts of it are drawn from March's experiences and some from historical records. The addendum in *Nowhere Boy* includes a section, "A Conversation with Katherine Marsh," that provides some insight into the inspiration of the work as well as its development. Marsh states in this section that she had moved with her husband, a newspaper reporter who was covering the European security issues, to Brussels, Belgium, in July 2015. This was the height of the refugee crisis in Europe, and refugees were camped out at Parc Maximilien

in the middle of Brussels. The house Marsh's family rented in Avenue Albert Jonnart became the inspiration for her book: "A sign at the end of the block gave a short history of Jonnart's life: how he had hidden a Jewish teenager in his house during the German occupation of the Second World War and how this act of resistance cost him his life" (355). When Marsh discovered a wine cellar in her rented house, she reflected on Jonnard's story and the possibility of hiding someone. Marsh then interviewed Syrian families, particularly from Aleppo, reporters, members of the local Muslim community, and did much internet research to "capture some of the larger emotional truth" (357).

At the same time, Marsh and her children had to navigate daily life, including attending a Belgium school in which they were the only English speakers, comprehend important documents, school notices, do homework, and all in a language they were not proficient in. For the Marsh family, "daily life as a foreigner was exhausting and stressful, even for a family with considerable advantages, like mine. It gave me a sense of compassion not only for my three immigrant grandparents, but for the million refugees arriving in Europe that year with so much less" (355). The author explains in an interview with *Morning Edition* that she "wrote this book in part because I wanted to help my children process this year in Europe" ("A Syrian Orphan Alone in Brussels" np). Additionally, Marsh experienced the terror attacks in Brussels as a parent filled with fear for her family and developed a greater understanding for the fragility of life. The schools closed, the city was under lockdown, and she had to explain to her children the reasons as well as the behavior necessary during a terrorist attack. These conversations made her aware of "how easy it was to let that fear distort perceptions and fact," which made her include "this struggle in the book and to try to do it honestly," with characters that are

willing to "grapple with their fear" (356). This honest wrestling with fear is another factor that makes this book such a remarkable read. Marsh is convincing in her character portrayals' struggle to face prejudices and fears and also at times when some characters decide not to overcome their biases.

Nowhere Boy is a fictional narrative of two parallel stories, one of fourteen-year-old Ahmed Nasser from Aleppo, Syria fleeing the war, and the other of Max Howard, a thirteen-year-old White American boy, who both find themselves at a house in Brussels in 2015. The alternate chapters from each boy's perspective (third-person omniscient) show their similar and different experiences and ultimately their profound friendship based on comparable character traits and interests. After a bomb kills his mother and two younger sisters, Ahmed and his father flee Syria. During their crossing of the Mediterranean, the father and others jump into the sea to prevent the dinghy from sinking, and he is swept away. The father is presumed drowned, and Ahmed is taken in by an Iraqi refugee family, who then make their way to Brussels through Greece and Hungary. Their journey ends in the tent city at Parc Maximillian, where they are trying to get registered and receive asylum. When their asylum request is denied, and the tent city is about to be shut down by authorities, the Iraqi family decides to move in with relatives close by and appeal their asylum denial. They want Ahmed to register as an unaccompanied minor and believe that as a Syrian orphan he would have a greater chance to receive asylum. However, Ahmed is horrified at the idea of yet another reception center, in which he might be mistreated, and now would be entirely alone. Also, he had hoped to go to England with his father, a former English teacher who had taught Ahmed enough English to get by. Therefore, not wanting to register in Belgium, which would

make him ineligible to apply for asylum in any other country, Ahmed leaves the Iraqi family in the middle of the night to meet with a smuggler—who betrays him by stealing the rest of his money and phone—and hides himself in the basement of a residential house to try to come up with a plan to reach England.

Max, whose father is a NATO contractor and had moved the family to Belgium for a year, is furious at having been uprooted from his former home. He had already been struggling in school, and now he is grudgingly repeating sixth grade in a country he does not enjoy and in a language he does not speak. Ahmed hides himself for several weeks until he is discovered by Max, who promises to keep him hidden and safe. With the help of two of his classmates, Farah and Oscar, Max manages to enroll Ahmed in his school. In the meantime, terrorist attacks result in a city lockdown, and the local police officer Fontaine suspects Ahmed of being involved in the attack, initiating a manhunt. Eventually, the teenagers discover that Ahmed's father is still alive and being detained in a Hungarian refugee center, so the two boys embark on a journey to reunite Ahmed with his father. Their scheme is discovered as they enter the refugee detention center, leaving Ahmed behind, but thankfully reunited with his father, while Max is returned to his parents, who are overjoyed that their son was found and is well. With the help of the "Hebrew Immigration Aid Society in Silver Spring, Maryland" and Max's parents' involvement, Ahmed and his father are allowed asylum in Charlottesville, Virginia, three hours away from Max's hometown of Washington, D.C. (352). The ending shows Ahmed, who is apprehensive about yet another beginning in which "enormous challenges awaited him—a new country, a new culture, a new school," filled with hope, since now he would have his best friend near and his father by his side (353).

As Barbara Johnston, one of the book's reviewers, notes that Marsh succeeds in weaving "seamlessly into the plot, the narrative of Albert Jonnart, who hid a Jewish refugee during Hitler's regime" and, therefore, the author "raises the question if risk-taking and disobeying the law sometimes serve a greater purpose" (62). Marsh likewise effectively interlaces topics of refugee integration, Islamophobia, and terrorism, while telling a suspenseful story full of humor and pathos. Marsh depicts complicated characters; even the initial bullying by Oscar makes way to a tender friendship based on mutual respect and honesty. At the same time, the main protagonists do not get away with a simplified heroic depiction. Max, who overcomes his paranoia and prejudices, stands by his friend Ahmed to the end but still is confronted by Farah for some of his unintentional racism—twice he groups all Middle Easterners together—and he has to painfully admit that he needs to continue to grapple with his own stereotyping (165, 259). It is also Farah, a second generation Belgian from a Moroccan family, who explains to Max (and by extension, of course, to the reader) what life is like as a Muslim in a European country (166). Farah, likewise, explains Islamic radicalization within Europe in terms that are easy to comprehend without interrupting the narrative flow (261). Furthermore, Marsh shines in her representation of inter-familial issues as well as relational growth and understanding. Max's parents are not villainized; they are depicted as complex characters, and their reactions to their son's actions are reasonable and justified.

However, it is in the detailed portrayal of the two main protagonists, as well as their friendship, that Marsh's book truly excels. The parallels between the two boys are not forced, making their relationship convincing. They are both genuinely good kids with

high, but not unrealistic, moral values who grew up in loving, supportive families. Similarly, both are capable of insights and realizations about themselves, others, and their environment. For example, in the middle of Max's self-pity about being a foreigner in a city with different food and different customs, he grasps how much harder it has to be for Ahmed. This humbling empathy allows him to deal with his own obstacles better, and by extension to provide more support for his friend. At the same time, Ahmed's hunger for learning provides a new perspective on education for Max, who had lived a privileged life without previously comprehending his advantages. In contrast, Ahmed's insights are bitter-sweet. He experiences the fear of terrorism and how he could be mistaken for an extremist himself: "He had fled thousands of kilometers to escape the war only to find that it wasn't enough" (265). The terrorist attacks place him under suspicion since he is a Middle Eastern boy and in hiding with a fake passport (his belongings had been destroyed when the bombs hit their neighborhood in Aleppo); he feels scared, just like all the other people around him. This sensitivity also helps Ahmed relate to others and convey his situation as well as his intensions with emotional clarity, for example, when he wins over Oscar by admitting his loneliness, and telling an emotive story about the loss of his father at sea, knowing that Oscar is struggling with his own father's death (179-182).

Additionally, Marsh balances trauma and agency in a genuine fashion while developing likeable characters with interesting cultural backgrounds. She does not shy away from describing the destruction of the war, the horror of losing loved ones, the PTSD with nightmares and bedwetting, and the survivor's guilt (131, 134, 147, 299). Ahmed, though, is not a mere victim from a war-ravaged country, who is understood by

the reader to be demarcated by the violence he escaped. As Ekaterina Strekalova-Hughes warns in her article "Unpacking Refugee Flight" (as mentioned before in other chapters of this dissertation), it is important for readers to learn that "other experiences, cultures, or personal qualities" define refugee children and that the protagonists can be "sincerely admired" for their skills unrelated to surviving the war (32, 37). This will help not only to remove the stigma of the victimized refugee, but likewise to avoid a process of "othering." Moreover, as Strekalova-Hughes stresses, narratives including "human qualities, experiences, and cultural practices" that were important prior to the war can be equally useful within the new host countries (36). Ahmed displays several skills that are distinct from the war and which are recognized by the reader as well as Max: he is studious, athletic, has a great sense of humor, displays honesty and integrity, and a tenderness towards living things. This tenderness is particularly exhibited in his care of the dying orchids that Max's mother had given up on and forgotten in the basement, and he manages to bring them back to life. His knowledge about the orchids, and later on his care for the Howards' garden, stems from his observations and help in his grandfather's nursery. The Nassers' background, such as the grandfather's plant nursery, is organically interwoven into the narrative, showing a culturally specific family from Aleppo without falling into stereotypes about Middle Eastern lifestyles.

Though it is Max who comes up with most of the adventurous schemes since he has the resources and most access to the outside world, it is Ahmed who remains the modest star of the novel. In a humorous and yet tender moment, Max even makes a direct reference through comic books to being the side-kick and Ahmed being the hero (274). It is also Max who acknowledges his debt to Ahmed for making him a better person and for

allowing him to discover his own agency. At the same time, both boys make equally important choices that affect their lives. Major decisions such as enrolling Ahmed in Max's school and traveling across the country to find his father are primarily Max's plans. However, Ahmed's multiple escapes are his choosing, as well as his idea to contact Jewish aid organizations to help him and his father apply for asylum. Similarly, every time he shows agency, Ahmed is rewarded by deeper connections and a greater sense of achievement. He displays Cavazzoni et al.'s multiple criteria for agency by, for example, playing a significant role in shaping his educational future through actively learning French and English. He willingly participates in sports by playing soccer during recess at school, which also cements some of his friendships with other teenagers besides Max. Furthermore, Ahmed continues to find strength in his religion; he prays regularly and refers to God or the Quran for support. Similarly, he remains emotionally connected to his cultural and historical past by recounting his home city's achievements and his love for his birth country. Above all, Ahmed forms and maintains friendships and draws great fortitude from them, but also remains emotionally connected to his deceased family members and draws strength from their previously shared knowledge and wisdom, such as his grandfather's nursery experience and his father's resiliency, religion, and humor. Therefore, the novel is effective in not only creating empathy, combating stereotypes, and questioning one's own racism, but also in lifting the refugee experience from mere victimhood to a survivor's success story with nuanced characters who have complex histories as well as promising futures as contributing members of their new host society.

Flying over Water:

The dual perspective of two protagonists, and the help they offer each other, is similarly well integrated in Shannon Hitchcock and N. H. Senzai's collaborative novel, *Flying over Water*. I analyzed some of Senzai's shortcomings as well as her successes of her previous work, *Escape from Aleppo*, in the last chapter. Fortunately, *Flying over Water* does not repeat any of the previous work's failings, such as unlikely resolutions, improbable plotlines, and awkward or clunky conversations between the characters. Instead, Senzai continues some of the positive aspects of her aforementioned novel, such as fully developed, complex characters, a positive multi-cultural portrayal of Islam, the beauty of Syria's historical heritage, and the complexity of trauma. Furthermore, both authors—Senzai and Hitchcock—succeed in normalizing therapy, portraying typical sibling and friendship behaviors, blending in seemingly well immigration and refugee history into the narrative, depicting alongside much humor and lightheartedness the difficulties of assimilation into a new country, and they especially illustrate how one can realistically help refugees integrate without being patronizing. There are some sentimentalized moments, especially during the board meeting in which the young adolescents express their voices, or when Yusra Mardini's story is misrepresented as hero worship, and of course in the redeeming ending, in which Noura, the Syrian protagonist, asserts that she "could practically deal with anything" since she has the love of her friends and family (*Flying over Water* 244). Though perhaps, she is right; as Bessel van der Kolk keeps remining us, love is the biggest protection against trauma, and human connections shield us from falling into despair (*The Body Keeps the Score* 52, 56, 306).

The novel starts with the Alwan family—father, mother, and the twin middle graders, Noura and Ammar, and a toddler brother—arriving in Tampa, Florida in 2017 after receiving asylum in the United States, coinciding with former President Trump's Muslim bans. They had spent two years at a Turkish refugee camp after the war had destroyed their home in Aleppo. They are welcomed by the Johnson family—Jordyn and her mother and father—who had learned in their church about the Alwans and had agreed to volunteer their time and help. Jordyn's mother readies the Alwan's apartment, signs up to be the English tutor for Mrs. Alwan; Jordyn's father, a dentist, agrees to provide free dental services for the whole family; and Jordyn is Noura's seventh-grade student ambassador. Noura's and Ammar's experiences in school reflect the general atmosphere in their new host country. They are met with much empathy and help but also racism and Islamophobia. During the narrative of the novel, the reader learns about the factual events of Muslim and White terrorist attacks, such as the arson attack of a mosque in Tampa. Noura and her brother receive permission to open a prayer and meditation room for all at school after difficulties and harassment, providing them with a private area to do their daily Muslim prayers. Several of the other students help decorate and beautify the little space, and it becomes a refuge not only for praying students, like Noura and Ammar, but also for other teenagers who need a quiet place to reflect or withdraw. The little room is vandalized, but instead of focusing on the potential perpetrators, the school board, after many opposing reactions from parents, calls for a special session. The children, their social studies teacher, and parents address the board, expressing their opinion. The novel ends with a positive vote from the school board to allow reinstating the prayer and meditation room. The parallel plotline addresses Noura's PTSD and grieve of having lost

her best friend during the friend's sea crossing to escape the war, as well as Jordyn's panic attacks in swim practice after her mother's miscarriage. The two girls connect over their sorrow and help each other process their trauma.

Flying over Water was published in 2020, two years after Senzai's first Syrian novel, *Escape from Aleppo*. Shannon Hitchcock, who is an acclaimed children's and young adult writer herself initiated the work as well as recruited Senzai to become her collaborator ("Author's Note by Shannon Hitchcock," and book back inlay, *Flying over Water* np). A former high school friend's daughter had converted to Islam, which Hitchcock found intriguing. At the same time, a picture of a Syrian refugee mother with her child in her pastor's office "tugged at her heart," prompting her to connect with a liaison for refugee services in her area and to meet with Syrian girls ("Author's Note by Shannon Hitchcock" np). Through her research she discovered remarkable stories of Syrian refugees, such as Yusra Mardini's, and she decided to juxtapose the story of Jordyn as a competitive swimmer with an anxiety disorder, and the story of Noura, whose best friend had drowned. However, Hitchcock's editor found the work wanting, prompting Hitchcock to consider revisions. During that time, Hitchcock discovered Senzai's *Escape from Aleppo*, and then asked Senzai if she would cowrite the book, doing Noura's sections, in her voice. It was Senzai who introduced the idea of the prayer room to the novel as well as a few other significant ideas ("Author's Note by Shannon Hitchcock" np). Senzai states in her "Author's Note" that Hitchcock graciously accepted her suggestions and agreed to have alternating chapters in which the girls, in first-person, tell their own narrative (np). She also describes how current events, for example racial

statements from the Trump administration, at the time of their collaboration affected some of their concepts (np).

The novel is not very exciting in terms of displaying adventure, nor does it have a particularly captivating plotline. However, the work is truly splendid in portraying the difficulties of adjusting to a new country as a refugee, to the trauma one carries, and to one's abilities and limits to work through the trauma. Furthermore, the work presents the power of empathy and human connections, and the importance of young people's involvement in civil engagement and (local) politics in the form of agency. Noura and Ammar encounter racism firsthand with classmates who are hostile towards them, and they learn about some of the Islamophobia and fear of refugees that prevail in society at large. Their father must work as a bell boy at a hotel, despite his background as a successful hotelier in Aleppo, and their mother, who used to write poetry, struggles with learning basic English. Noura explains to Jordyn that trauma is an ongoing process: "… though we escaped the war, we are still suffering from it" (86). Furthermore, she describes tolls that trauma work takes: "I am tired of always having to be brave" (146). Jordyn's empathy is also significant within this novel; she envisions Noura's normal life prior to the Syrian revolution, the horrors of the war, as well as her current hardships without falling into any patronizing traps of pitying her. This form of empathy can be described by Dominick LaCapra's notion of "empathic unsettlement," in which others do not appropriate the experience of the traumatized but still develop understanding of the trauma without additionally victimizing the survivor (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 41). Instead of any patronizing treatment, Jordyn and others join in solidarity after the fire at the mosque to show their support, as well as the rebuilding of the prayer room, and

most importantly they all come together at the school board meeting to demonstrate their agency and to express their voice.

Moreover, both authors succeed in showing how agency and trauma are strongly connected. Noura teaches Jordyn some of the breathing techniques she learned from her therapist in the Turkish refugee camp, which she uses when she has panic attacks produced by her fear of water. It is because of Noura's insistence and example that Jordyn deals with her own feelings of trauma and starts visiting her mother's therapist. This decision changes her relationship to her mother positively and allows her to return to competitive swimming. Simultaneously, Ammar encourages Noura to face her fears; she decides to let Jordyn teach her to swim. The three teenagers process their trauma by sharing their suffering and emotions with each other, a method that trauma therapists like Bessel van der Kolk stress as a healing strategy: "Recovery from trauma involves (re)connecting with our fellow human beings" (*The Body Keeps the Score* 212). This is especially true for finding words to express one's anguish, or as Kolk states, "Communicating fully is the opposite of being traumatized" (*The Body Keeps the Score* 237). Additionally, the three teenagers see others' skills and encourage them to showcase their abilities. This is demonstrated in small gestures, as when Noura support's her brother's coaching of neighborhood kids in soccer. In a larger example, Ammar displays his artistic abilities in school through working on a recreation of the Aleppo Mosque while discussing the destruction of the city by the Syrian war. Noura had told him: "Don't let what happened in Syria take away your voice. You need to share your experiences *and* your talent" (*Flying over Water* 88). Ammar had been trapped under rubble after an airstrike and continues to bear the scars to show his trauma.

These small steps of demonstrating their abilities build their confidence and ultimately allow the young people to speak up at the board meeting, expressing their *voices* openly and confidently. As Kolk emphasizes, "Competence is the best defense against the helplessness of trauma" (343). It is also, as I discussed previously, in the eyes of Ekatrina Strekalova-Hughes, what makes the portrayal of refugees more holistic and less a reductive narrative about resiliency during war or the escape, but instead incorporates the depiction of competencies and skills unrelated to being a refugee. Incompetence is often a hallmark of being a refugee in a new host country, a new place with its culture and language that must be learned and navigated. Additionally, many of the previous skills are not useful or applicable for refugees, which can add to victimization and othering. This makes the portrayal of Noura's and Ammar's competence and skills, as well as their agency, particularly important within *Flying over Water*. In this novel, the Syrian young adult refugees and their peers join in solidarity to show their agency, particularly in the arena of civil engagement and (local) political involvement. They rise from their position of being victimized war refugees, who continue to be mistreated in their host county, to instead becoming survivors with a voice and the ability to defend their causes, as well as contribute positively to their new homeland.

Other Words for Home:

The demonstration of skills, unrelated to resilience in a combat situation, is equally important in Jasmine Warga's novel *Other Words for Home*. Connections and solidarity with others is an important theme in this work as well. Furthermore, the book

addresses the balancing act of trying to assimilate to a new place while still keeping one's former identity. *Other Words for Home* is written in free verse and marketed to middle graders, though the work's lyricism seems often more appropriate for older readers, or perhaps for all ages, which makes this novel so enjoyable. The work focuses primarily on the experience of resettlement and how relating to others on a profoundly human level can positively affect the process of assimilation. Jude, approximately twelve years old, and her pregnant mother seek refuge at her relatives' home in Cincinnati, Ohio. Jude's father decides to remain and look after their modest store and home in an unnamed Syrian seaside city. Jude's older brother resolves to join the Syrian Free Army and help the fighters combat Assad's forces. *Other Words from Home* does not concentrate on the harrowing life in a war-torn city, nor the dangerous journey out of Syria (Jude and her mother leave on a regular airplane), but rather the difficulties of adjusting to an (at times unfriendly) host country and even antagonistic relatives; Jude's American-Syrian cousin Sarah treats her coldly and even cruelly for most of the novel until Jude and her mother find a way to connect to Sarah on an emotional level.

Similar to *Flying over Water*, Warga's novel does not captivate with adventures or an exciting story line. The key features are subtler moments, emotional connections, and personal insights. Significant events in terms of the plot are Islamophobic threats towards Jude and her mother and vandalism in form of graffiti on her best friend's restaurant. However, these moments also engender agency in the protagonists. Jude stands up for her mother when a stranger accosts them and, pointing a finger at her mother's hijab, declares: "*You don't have to wear that anymore . . . You're in America now. You're free*" (*Other Words for Home* 187, emphasis in original). Jude responds to

the woman initially in a mumbled and jumbled frenzy, but then more confidently says to herself and her mother that "*We are happy*" (188, 189). Later on in the novel, when a Muslim terrorist attack results in an increase of Islamophobia, Jude is not only glared at by people but is also harassed by a stranger on the street and told "*Go back to where you came from. . . We don't want you here*" (263). She is frozen in horror and disbelief, unable to respond this time. She cannot find the words to explain that there is no reason to fear or hate her (264). However, the incident was witnessed by her friend Miles, her romantic interest, who confesses to having observed the confrontation and to his cowardness and inability to speak up. Miles's confession initially makes Jude even more uncomfortable, but then she realizes that his own anxiety connects her to him, that she shares the same painful feelings and awkwardness. This awareness enables her not only to feel comforted, but also to brazenly declare her uncle's home as her own when Miles asks her where she is headed: "I am about to say my uncle's house,/ but instead I choose to be brave/ instead I say, *Home*" (265). The emotional connection to Miles has enabled Jude to choose to be courageous, as well as to embrace and call her uncle's house her home.

Another major event is also characterized by agency and emotional connection.When her best friend's restaurant is vandalized, June's initial response is frozen terror again. What is worse, her friend Layla is feeling isolated by the event, experiencing herself as a citizen not wanted in her own county without any homeland to claim. Layla's family is originally from Lebanon, but she has never even visited her parents' home country. Layla pushes Jude away emotionally until Jude's mother organizes a fundraiser in the nearby mosque to offset the costs of the cleanup and to show

solidarity with Layla and her parents. This act has a rippling effect. Layla is able to admit that her anger had made her blind to Jude's support; but moreover, Sarah, Jude's cold and distant cousin, opens herself up emotionally, being social at the fundraiser and communicating openly with Jude afterwards. Additionally, Jude's mother, who had struggled the most with assimilating to her new environment and had constantly found fault with America and Americans, is able to make new American friends at the mosque. Interestingly, Uncle Mazin, Jude's maternal uncle, who according to her and her mother had integrated too much and had abandoned his Syrian roots, feels rejoined with other Arab people at the solidarity fundraiser. The rippling effect of the fundraiser demonstrates Judith Lewis Herman's recommendations for social action to develop connections with others and to combat victimization (*Trauma and Recovery* 207-208). This process is two-fold in this case. Firstly, the solidarity helps Layla and her parents receive emotional support as well as financial help. Secondly, Jude's mother shows ability to support others, organize an event, demonstrate empathy, and make social connections.

At the same time, the event gives Warga a chance to address some of the larger issues such as Muslim terrorist attacks, vandalism, and Islamophobia that are playing out in the United States as well as the rest of the world. Through the voice of Layla, Jude and by extension the readers are told that Americans are troubled by violence in their own country or other Western nations. On the other hand, Americans and Westerners in general are rather disinterested when attacks happen somewhere else. Jude states". . . Americans/ think it's normal/ for there to be violence/ in places where/ people like me are from, . . . That they all see people like me/ and think/ violence/ sadness/ war" (271). As

Strakalova-Hughes stresses, this "simplified duality of countries as either *safe* or *unsafe* pathologizes some countries and privileges others," while disregarding "socio-historical and cultural complexities of both sets of countries" (35). Warga's insight into this dichotomy is particularly visible in the absence of war trauma. *Other Words for Home* lacks bloodshed and an escape narrative, though the author still shows the emotional consequences of war trauma and interweaves the reasons for the Syrian conflict. In addition, Warga effectively portrays the trauma of assimilation, the suffering caused by racism and discrimination, along with the undercurrent of the family's constant fear for Jude's brother (who joins the revolution) and father (who remains behind) and the heartbreak caused by the family's separation.

Moreover, *Other Words for Home* shows an array of agency with many nuances not found in some of the other literature since the author focuses strongly on the process of integration and resettlement in an environment that allows the protagonists some choices and self-determination. Warga displays the characters who maneuver through the maze of American society without losing their Syrian identity. Jude, for example, participates in the school's annual musical in a role usually not assigned to girls like her—girls wearing a head scarf and who appear "other" from the mainstream American girls. As mentioned earlier, her mother's hijab was a contentious item before in a confrontation with a stranger. The topic of a head covering is recurrent, especially once Jude starts her menses and elects to wear a hijab. Jude chooses her hijab as part of her rite of passage as a woman and views her menses as a happy occasion to be celebrated. Other Muslim women, Layla's mother and Jude's mother, support and rejoice with her, but Sarah's mom—a White, American woman—is worried that this is a form of gender

oppression imposed on Jude by her mother. Jude understands that her aunt is worried about her, and she is also aware that there are places in which girls and women are forced into a dress code. At the same time, Jude tries to stress that her choice to wear a hijab does not reduce her freedom of thought: "I want women like Aunt Michelle/ to understand/ that it is not only women who look like them/ who are free/ who think/ and care about other women" (235).[2] Moreover, Jude does not see an incongruity in her wish to be a movie star (her dream) and wearing a scarf. Likewise, when she decides to try out for the school musical, she understands that others, regardless of what they look like, want to be on stage, and this makes her feel less lonely, less ostracized for her scarf, and more accepted.

Certainly, the topic of acceptance looms large within the pages of *Other Words for Home*—accepting of oneself, of the other, of another's culture, and even of one's circumstances. Acceptance similarly associated with the idea of belonging and home, and as the title suggests, this is an important idea within the narrative. Warga's novel is divided into five sections spanning a year, written in first person through the perspective of Jude, tracing her internal journey to find a sense of home in America while remaining

[2] It is outside the scope of this dissertation to address the multifaceted issues regarding Muslim women's veiling, the associated questions of feminism, and Western portrayal of oppressed Middle Eastern women. There are many articles and books written on these topics. For a start, I would recommend reading Madeleine Chapman's essay "Feminist Dilemmas and the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women: Analysing Identities and Social Representations," or Jen'Nan Ghazal Read and John P. Bartkowski's article "To Veil or Not to Veil? A Case Study of Identity Negotiation among Muslim Women in Austin, Texas." Both articles are interested in agency and the choice of veiling, as well as issues of identity. The former essay is interested in Muslim women in the UK and Denmark, and the latter, as the title suggests, focuses on Muslim women in a specific location in the United States.

true to her Syrian roots. Jude longs to be part of her cousin's American world, but it is not until after the fundraiser that Sarah allows her emotional and physical closeness. In the meantime, Jude becomes friends with the other students in her English as a Second Language Class (ESL) and even feels a sense of home and belonging there. Poignantly, it is her uncle Mazin who tells her that "*You belong here* [in the United States]*./ And so do I*," and who makes her understand that "*It's not a contest between here/ and there* [Syria]*./ You don't have to choose*" (297). When her baby sister is born, the entire family rejoices. The mother names her Amal, "after Auntie Amal,/ after hope," and Jude thinks, "*You will belong her./ You will belong wherever you want./ You will make anywhere beautiful*" (312). At the end, Jude feels at home, not only in her uncle's house and in her beloved Syria, but also on stage when she performs her small part for the school musical. Jude, like her sister, embodies hope for a brighter future and beauty for wherever she goes.

It is no surprise that the novel is a Newberry Honor Book. Warga captures well the many struggles and some of the successes of Syrian refugees trying to forge a new life in their host countries. Critics have also noticed Warga's talent, and the reviews have been very positive. Autumn Allen, writing in *The Horn Book Magazine,* has pointed out that Jude's voice is "convincing and authentic" while being "infused with thoughtfulness, humor, determination, and hope" (45). Amina Chaudhri in her review gushes that the work "puts its hands around your heart and holds it, ever so gently, so that you're aware of your own fragility and resilience—just like Jude is while her life changes drastically from one day to the next" (75). Chaudhri likewise concludes that "the story is resolved with satisfying closure and believable possibilities" (76). I would concur with Chaudhri's

assessment since, though it is a redemptive narrative, the ending is realistic—Jude only performs a small part in the school musical, not suddenly becoming a famous actress, and the open-endedness of the political situation for the father and brother balance the optimistic outlook of Jude's American life. Furthermore, Jude's journey of self-discovery remains authentic, and her development of self-respect, self-love, and agency are consistent throughout the narrative.

Warga stated in an interview with Sara Grochowski for *Publishers Weekly Online* that her intention to portray Jude full of agency, confidence, and "love for herself" was "a gift that I was giving to my 12-year-old self, who didn't see that on the page" when she was growing up (np). Besides, Warga emphasizes the importance to use her voice, considering she comes from a Jordanian family, and "to write books that inspire young readers to choose kindness and empathy in the most radical of ways" (Grochowski np). These intentions return me to one of my initial interests in the topic of Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults. As Phillip Nel states in his "Introduction" to the "Special Issue on Migration, Refugees, and Diaspora in Children's Literature" in the *Quarterly* publication of the *Children's Literature Association*, the academic community has a responsibility to "guide readers to books that harness the imagination's power to nourish empathy" (359). Nel further emphasizes that academia is not always able to affect government policies, but "when children's literature cultivates an emphatic imagination, it can bring people of all ages close to understanding the displacement felt by migrants, refugees, and those in the diasporic communities" (Nel 359). Additionally, Nel stresses the importance for displaced children to find themselves and their life experiences in literature that shows their connectedness to others in similar situations and

supports their sense of community (358). Warga successfully fulfills all these responsibilities—her characters positively depict Syrian and Lebanese Muslims, her protagonists encourage empathy and imagination, characters' trauma and agency are convincingly represented, and her dialogues (inner as well as spoken) inspires social justice and change. As Brian Attebery reminds us, "Why do stories have to be political? Because we live within and upon injustice. We need stories that tell us so and to remind us that there might be other possibilities" (324).

CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSIONS

"The overriding concern is to respect the experience and transmission of trauma, its massive impact on our cultures and cultural productions and the urgency of confronting it. Trauma matters, and the literature of trauma matters. We are diminished as moral subjects if we do not attend to that reality."

(Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, "Introduction to Literary Trauma Studies," in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* 7)

"And I wonder. If we ever go back, will we recognize each other?
I have changed and my country has changed."

(Nujeen Mustafa 267)

After over a decade of war, Syria is cut up like slices of pie with continuously combatant factions, and civilians are still trapped in the middle. According to Nather Henafe Alali, a Syrian journalist living in exile in Germany, his countrymen and women are either stuck in prisons or in long lines for "bread, gas, water, and medicine" while collapsing on the streets of Damascus ("Ein Stück Kuchen im Dreck" 23, translations and paraphrasing mine). Alali refers to Syria as alienated from Syrians and as a piece of cake fallen into muck (23). Yassin al-Haj Saleh, a Syrian poet and former political prisoner of the Assad regime, also living in Germany, stresses that Syrians are not able to proclaim, "Never Again," since the time has not yet come when the country is at peace and its political tyranny ended ("Das vergitterte Herz" 19). Both writers also point out that the same followers of the regime, who committed atrocities and severe human rights violations, are still there, making it impossible for refugees to return safely.

America's involvement in the Syrian war has been as complicated as the conflict itself. In a story from March 2021 for NPR titled "Syria's Civil War Started a Decade Ago. Here's Where It Stands," the reporters, Ruth Sherlock, Scott Neuman, and Nada Homsi, explain how the civil war quickly turned into a proxy war among big political players such as Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the United States (np). The correspondents also chronicle how American presidents' responses have varied over the last decade with former President Barack Obama's administration abandoning its promised involvement after the "red line" was crossed, and the Assad regime used chemical weapons on its own people. At the same time the CIA has been "funneling an estimated $1 billion worth of arms annually to anti-Assad forces" (np). Then the Trump administration cut support for the Kurds to remain in good graces with the Turkish government, while Russia targeted not only ISIS groups but also the Free Syrian Army. More recently, the Biden administration has been involved in airstrikes against "obscure militia groups in eastern Syria," primarily to "settle scores" with Iran and Iranian supported Shiite Islamic militias (np). Throughout the decade of war, the Assad regime dropped barrel bombs directly on hospitals, bread lines, and civilian homes, while claiming to fight Islamic terrorists. The war also led to a destabilized Europe, heartening right-wing nationalists and encouraging Islamophobia (Sherlock et al. np).

Though we do not hear much about the Syrian conflict in current news anymore (the Russian war against the Ukraine has taken most of the spotlight and public interest, and perhaps people have gotten exhausted of similar heartbreaking images from the same place), the initial problems of the refugees and internally displaced, as well as the ones who were able to remain in their homes, continue. As the U.N. High Commissioner for

Refugees (UNHCR) states, "Syria remains the world's largest refugee crisis" (qtd. in Sherlock et al. np). A year later, as of June 2022, according to the UNHCR (there is no current data for the year 2023), Syrians make up 27% of the world's total refugee population (*UNHCR Global Trends* np). Syria was back on the news in February 2023 when a devastating earthquake hit northern Syria and southeast Turkey, where not only millions of Turks and Kurds live, but also millions of displaced Syrian refugees. The results of the earthquake's destruction are as unfathomable as the decade-long war. Syrians, who were already struggling for decent living conditions, found themselves once again without shelter and counting thousands of dead bodies.

So how do we—writers, critics, Syrian citizens, and all who care—claw and dig ourselves out of the wreckage and rubble of the Syrian trauma? Obviously, nothing I write or write about can assuage or balm the suffering of the Syrian people. I can only hold onto hope for a better future, not fall into despair, and contribute within the small extent of my capabilities. My attempted answer has been in this dissertation: a focus on how agency significantly improves the lives of the traumatized Syrian refugees, specifically in the literature for children and young adults. My purpose has been to show how agency transforms the Syrian refugees from victims to survivors. Furthermore, my interest is on how an emphasis on agency within the literature enables the reader to understand the Syrian refugees as complete human beings with individual skills, a specific cultural background, and abilities that go beyond the typical escape narrative. Finally, as an additional positive outcome, I hope that the Syrian refugees will find their better selves—with a strong voice, agency, and resilience—within the pages of the literature, and maybe even within this dissertation.

To understand trauma and agency, I started with the forerunners of trauma studies such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, who view trauma from a psychoanalytical and historical perspective, respectively. From there I examined contemporary trauma studies, with less focus on psychoanalysis and postmodern techniques of literary examinations, but instead with a greater emphasis on agency and voice, as well as current therapeutic methods to cope with trauma. Bessel van der Kolk was my greatest source regarding medical aspects of how agency can affect trauma positively. Other major psychological interpretations came from studies conducted by Cavazzoni. In terms of literary scholarship, I have found the works of educators such as Ekaterina Strekalova-Hughes and Julia Hope illuminating. In terms of children's literary scholarship, Marah Gubar's and Richard Flynn's concepts of a kinship model supported my ideas about viewing young people's agency in the context of their family and extended community. My aim throughout the dissertation has been to synthesize the different approaches—psychological, historical, literary analysis, refugee studies—to emphasize the importance of agency in the managing of trauma. As the Routledge "Introduction" points out, trauma studies embody medical as well as social components, and I have tried to demonstrate these connections (3). My hope is that this study has connected some of the fields of trauma studies in the interpretation of the literature, and has also added to the existing conversations about trauma the importance of agency.

Furthermore, as Janelle B. Mathis in her article "Demonstrations of Agency in Contemporary International Children's Literature: An Exploratory Critical Content Analysis Across Personal, Social, and Cultural Dimensions," stresses, it is through literature that children can "immerse themselves in story worlds, gaining insights into

how people feel, live, and think around the world. They also come to recognize their common humanity as well as to value cultural differences" (208). Mathis's interest is not specifically on refugee literature; instead, she examines how international literature enables readers to understand the protagonists' culture and agency, develop informed citizens, and foster greater empathy as well as world knowledge. However, I have likewise applied these aspects to the Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults. Here, too, I have emphasized how the authors as well as the scholars focused on agency, cultural backgrounds, protagonists' skills, and the books' ability to foster global understanding of the Syrian conflict with its consequences. Additionally, like Laurie Vickroy in her study *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, I have stressed the importance of the (extended) family and the community. Vickroy states that "The social environment, the severity of the event, and the individual's characteristics and experience all determine how someone copes with trauma. Social supports are essential to survivors' adjustment" (14). Therefore, I have repeatedly emphasized in my readings of the literature the importance of the protagonists' connections to their environment and how these connections enable agency and a better coping with trauma.

I have tried to also establish that the literature itself, as well as some of the scholarly research, has real-life implications, that it does not consist merely of lofty academic analyses of texts. Several of my examples have been studies in the lives of actual Syrian refugees, such as the aforementioned article by Cavazzoni. Other examples come from the authors themselves; for instance, Francesca Sanna (one of the writers I discussed in the second chapter), writes about the books' influence on children when used by librarians, school teachers, and in workshops (*Knowledge Quest* 70072). Sanna

witnessed firsthand how her work increased understanding and empathy, as well as a shared sense of humanity (*Knowledge Quest* 71). In addition, Alexandra Alter in her article "Children's Books Wade into Refugee Territory" for *The New York Times*, recalls how a twelve-year-old student after reading *My Beautiful Birds* in class was initially overwhelmed with emotions, finding her figurative self and her family's story within the pages. In accordance, I have pointed out when the authors of Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults brought themselves into the pages of their books, especially if they had grown up feeling unrepresented within literary works of their childhood.

RECOMMENDATONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

Trauma studies have tended to focus, not surprisingly, on trauma and its negative effects. Also, the studies tend to center on modern or postmodern texts. Hopefully, this study can connect to contemporary voices of critics who want to inspire some new approaches and show how trauma can be mitigated by focusing on agency and individual choices. Besides, I have joined the scholarly research on how fictional as well as (auto)biographical texts in children's and young adult literature are worthy and in need of being analyzed through the lenses of trauma and agency. Additional studies could expand the theories of trauma studies and place greater emphasis on works for younger readers. Also, further studies could include more in-depth examinations of individual works, or perhaps concentrations on only fictional texts, or only autobiographical novels, or only picture books. I have hinted at some topics that were out of the scope of this dissertation, some of which might provide fertile ground for supplementary studies, such as

investigations into gendered representations of the characters or ecological aspects of displacement.[1] Other topics that surfaced during my readings, which are out of the scope of this study as well, were the connections the protagonists experienced to nature, the loss of their gardens, the smell of jasmine, which is associated with Syria, particularly Damascus (known as the City of jasmine), and their relationships to animals. The ideas of how the characters' bonds to flora and fauna affect their processes of trauma in the context of place and the natural world might provide a fruitful subject to analyze.

SYRIAN REFUGEE LITERATURE NOW

Since the Syrian situation continues to be dire, any study of Syrian refugee literature will remain timely and needed, regardless of the specific topic. Moreover, as previously discussed, trauma remains and is not automatically resolved, but instead must be worked through. It is perhaps not surprising then that the latest work of children's literature pertaining to the Syrian refugee crisis, written in English, is set within and depicts the early years of the war. Zoulfa Katouh's debut novel *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*, published in September 2022, is not strictly historical in its portrayal of the succession of factual events of the war, (she wrote it on and off over the course of years), but instead the work aims to capture the essence of the revolution, the devastation of the country, and the traumatic consequences to the population.

---

[1] See also *A Gendered Approach to the Syrian Refugee Crisis*, edited by Jane Freedman, et al.; and "Gender" and "Intersectionality" in *The Routledge Companion*; also see the article "Climate Trauma" in *The Routledge Companion* for further information.

The story begins one year after the war, in medias res, and is told from the first-person perspective of seventeen-year-old Salama, who finds herself struggling for physical as well as emotional survival in her besieged hometown of Homs. Her mother had been killed by a bomb, her father and brother are detained and presumably dead. Salama cares for her brother's pregnant wife Layla while working as a volunteer at the hospital. Then Salama meets Kenan, another young adult, who is taking care of his teenage brother and little sister, the only survivors of his immediate family. Salama and Kenan are initially struggling over whether to leave their beloved Syria, not wanting to abandon their country and people. However, Salama had promised her brother to take care of Layla, and it is Layla who insists that they seek refuge. The two newly blended families depart on a dangerous journey out of Homs and eventually start a new life in Canada.

As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow is very similar in its portrayal of trauma to the other works previously discussed; it shows violence against civilians by the government regime, as well as the destruction of the country and its people through missiles and barrel bombs. Some of the protagonists' PTSD responses are likewise comparable, such as Kenan's brother's inability to speak since the death of their parents and his regression into behaviors of a younger child. Additionally, the work demonstrates analogous examples of agency and personal choices: Salama and Kenan are religious and find strength in their beliefs, Layla uses much humor to cope with the situation, Kenan's political and social activism manifests in the form of documenting the atrocities on camera and uploading them to *YouTube*, Salama and others help strangers, and the main characters choose love and hope over hatred and despair. Other similarities to formerly

discussed works are the emphasis on the romantic relationship of the two main protagonists (something I do not particularly relish but that might be enjoyable for young adult readers), the repetitive emphasis on Salama's hijab as a normal and modern expression of her life, and the somewhat redemptive ending. However, Katouh's emphases on lingering PTSD and the mourning of losses render the ending credible and authentic. Besides, the novel can be analyzed with the same criteria I used previously; for example, Gubar's and Flynn's kinship models of interconnectedness are important for the establishment of agency for the young adults, as well as Kolk's concepts of working through trauma, and Cavazzoni et al.'s criteria for the use of individual choices to effectively deal with trauma.

What makes this work remarkable though are the narrative techniques, unexpected revelations, and its great lyricism. Salama's PTSD is not merely represented in nightmares and repetitive thoughts and panic attacks, but instead in the manifestation of a specter named Khawf (meaning "fear" in Arabic). Moreover, in a spectacular moment, the reader and Kenan find out that Layla has been dead for some time, but that Salama's inability to accept yet another tragic death forced her to continue living with an imaginary sister-in-law. Neither hallucination renders Salama an unreliable narrator, but instead reinforces trauma's influence over one's mind while still being able to overtly function. Salama realizes several things about Khawf, for example, that he is her brain's survival mechanism, and though his appearances are terrifying, his intentions are to protect her. Once Salama makes a succession of choices, she is able to depart from Khawf. Overcoming her guilt towards her country and its people, she decides to leave, and in a series of complicated decision (not relevant to discuss here) gets herself, Kenan,

and his siblings out of the country. Additionally, the author underlines the significance of social connections by showing how Salama and Kenan thrive once they accept help from friends and Kenan's extended family in Germany. Lastly, Katouh expresses the implications of enduring suffering and the importance of working through them as Salama goes to therapy to process her trauma and her losses.

Throughout the novel, it is apparent how hard Salama and Kenan struggle emotionally to leave their cherished country. The protagonists' survivor's guilt and struggle to leave their country in its most dire situation reflects the author's feelings. Zoulfa Katouh tells Deana Hassanein and Nadda Osman in an interview that she is Canadian-born whose parents are both from Syria (np). Katouh had spent her childhood in Dubai and Switzerland but developed a close relationship to Syria during her summer visits. She was sixteen-years-old when the war started, and she found herself powerless to change her ancestral home's situation, feeling guilty for her lucky circumstances (Hassanein and Osman np). In an interview with Joanne O'Sullivan for *Publishers Weekly*, the author explains that over the course of years, through several revisions, and with the support of an excellent agent and editor, she finally found her voice and the story for *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (44). Katouh also shared with O'Sullivan the positive responses from teenagers during her school visits, as well as the Syrian community and Syrians "who have thanked her for telling their story" (45). As the book's inlay states, the work is "a love letter to Syria and its people" (*As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*). This excerpt demonstrates some of Katouh's lyricism as represented in the tender internal dialogue of Salama, standing at the shore, about to depart her precious Syria:

> Just on the other side, safety—not freedom. I am leaving freedom behind, and I can feel the earth's grief when I get out of the car. The tired weeds try to encircle my ankles, begging me to stay. They murmur stories about my ancestors. The ones who stood right here where I stand. The ones whose discoveries and civilization encompassed the whole world. The ones whose blood runs through my veins. My footprints sink deep into the soil where theirs have long since been washed away. They plead with me: *It's your country*. This earth belongs to me and my children. (365-366)

It might be unusual to end a conclusion with a brief discussion of a work previously not introduced; however, the timing of *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*'s publication and its subject matter are so indicative of how trauma is still processed within the literature of the Syrian war and how agency is represented, that I have found it imperative to include the novel in my finishing remarks. The work exemplifies my notions of how agency positively helps the characters cope with trauma. But most importantly, the novel demonstrates that writers are *still* processing not just the war as a historical event, but as an occurrence *still* within the Syrian psyche. Like Katouh, I, too, have felt the survivor's guilt of the exiled; and like her, my love for Syria has been one of the impetuses to focus not on the pain of suffering from trauma, but instead to embrace agency, love, and hope. Perhaps Kenan's encouraging words to Salama can serve as a reminder not only of the importance of trauma within the Syrian refugee literature for children and young adults, but also of the significance of agency: "No matter what happens, you remember that this world is more than the agony it contains. We *can* have happiness, Salama. Maybe it doesn't come in a cookie cutter format, but we will take the fragments and we will rebuild it" (146, emphasis in original).

POSTSCRIPT

"Most research is me-search"

(Beatrice Beebe, qtd. in *The Body Keeps the Score* 111)

The act of writing,
is it not a scandalous act in itself?
. . . To write
is to live on the cliff's edge
clinging to a blade
of grass.

(Maram al-Masri 53)

INTRODUCTION

My mother, brother (Masen), and I left Syria in 1986 after all my mother's efforts to remain in the country had failed. My Syrian-born father had attempted to strangle her, and she had at last realized that all of our lives were at stake. My brother is ten years older than me and had been a regional Judo champion. My mother began to fear that he would defend himself or her against my father's violence, which was escalating. Over the course of their nearly twenty-year marriage, my father's actions and thinking had become increasingly erratic, and a few weeks before we left, he began demanding that my mother follow an extremely restricted way of behavior: that she quit her job, remain in the house, and not speak to anyone—behavior far beyond even what most Syrian women were asked to adhere to at that time. These were not cultural demands but restraints that my mentally ill father was trying to impose on my mother, who until then had been working full time and participating in a rich social life. My mother had attempted to find a legal solution, such as a divorce or separation, but according to Syrian law, my mother had no

legal claim to her children and would need to leave the country in case of a divorce. My father's family, though keenly aware of his violence and the danger he posed to us, did not stage in intervention to protect us from our father or find a different solution, which would have been customary in our culture. Out of desperation, my mother finally fled the country with me and my brother, returning to her native Germany. Though I was very young at the time, my memories of this flight, and the combination of a lack of legal protection and a lack of family involvement over the years, not only turned me psychologically against my Syrian family, but made me resent the entire country, making Syria in my eyes and mind responsible for our family's tragedy.

Until our escape from Syria and relocation to West Germany, a little suburb of Damascus had been my home and Arabic my primary language. My mother had met my Syrian father in the mid-1960s in East Germany. He was studying sports at the University in Leipzig, and she was a nurse at a nearby hospital. My mother was drawn to my father because he was smart and charming, and moreover he represented a cosmopolitan world to her. She was from a small East German town and grew up working hard at her parents' bakery. She was working hard again as a nurse at a hospital in Leipzig, and when my parents married and had my brother, she worked three shifts, helped my father with his studies at the University of Leipzig, and raised my brother. My mother knew little about my father's family history, and he did not encourage her to learn Arabic, stating that his German was enough for them to communicate. Once my mother lived in Syria, my father's family started to tell her stories of his early violence against younger family members and animals. Moreover, my mother started noticing the dysfunctionality of my father's family, and she learned the cultural taboos that prevent families from seeking

psychiatric help for a family member such as my father, who clearly at an early age showed some antisocial behavior.

In 1974, when my brother was about six years old, my father had to return to Syria to fulfill his two-year military service. East Germany, which still had the Wall at the time and closed borders, did not allow easy traveling in or out, and government authorities informed my mother that she would have to decide on her permanent residency (either move to Syria or remain in East Germany) without initially traveling to Syria or having a visitor status. My mother decided to uproot my brother and pack up her life in a few boxes and follow my father to Syria, and while he was away at the military service with little visits home, she lived with her mother-in-law and her brother-in-law's family. My mother, ever so resourceful, took an Arabic class and shortly after began working as a nurse in a hospital in Damascus. My brother was very traumatized by this abrupt change in countries and societies, and he completely stopped speaking for over six weeks, but when he resumed verbally communicating, he became almost fluent in both German and Arabic. At the same time, my father had started to abuse my brother physically and emotionally. He did this gradually and initially behind my mother's back. We still do not know the extent of my brother's trauma since he does not share this with us. My father's violence was intensifying and over the years his abuse became more and more apparent.

By the time my mother decided to escape my father's violence, she had lived in Syria thirteen years. She was fluent in Arabic, enjoyed her work, and had come to love the people and country. And though I had been born in Damascus and Syria was my

home, I felt my mother's helplessness in the face of our situation even at an early age. I had come to learn of our legal predicament and realized early on that my father's family was no help to us. This realization made me extremely resentful as a child and that resentment has persisted in adulthood. Only recently have I been able to shake my anger towards my country of origin. The lack of legal protection for my mother and her children felt like a symbol of Syria's pathological manifestation of a sick and sad misogynistic place. But then my mother shared with me two stories that tumbled my iron tower of self-righteous pain and myopia. I had told my mother that I was interested in processing some of my escape trauma while at the same time working on my dissertation. I had also told her about my continued resentment against Syria and its people and how I was worried that my perception would cloud my judgement. I desperately wanted to find some peace with my Syrian heritage and to reconcile my pain with something positive. In addition, I wanted to find a more nuanced truth to our stories and relinquish my emotional baggage that kept me from a fair assessment of Syria and my past.

The first story my mother told me was of her visit to a Syrian lawyer (several months before we fled). She wanted to gauge what her rights were and how she could have a relatively amicable divorce with at least partial custody of her children. At this point, my mother still maintained the hope to remain in Syria. The lawyer apologetically informed her that as a foreigner and a woman, she had no rights. She would lose all rights to her children in a divorce, and since her citizen status depended on her marriage, she would also have to leave the country. This lawyer stood up and came around the desk; he grasped my mother's hands, and with a bow he deeply apologized that the laws of his country were set against her. I still become teary eyed when I place the image of this

bowing lawyer in front of my mind. It shakes me to my core that a stranger to my mother had recognized her value as a mother and human being and that he had felt shame and helplessness at her plight.[1]

In the second story, the people were not strangers; they knew my mother intimately. My mother had worked as the director of nursing in a hospital in Damascus for many years, and she was at the time of the lawyer's visit the head nurse in a children's nursery. Moreover, she had also become the community nurse in our region. When people were ill, they would call on her, sometimes in the middle of the night. She would visit the sick, administer medications, give injections, place IV's, and hold the hands of the dying. All these services were, of course, without charge. I knew this about my mother; it was part of the fabric of our lives. So maybe I should not have been as surprised at her second account. And still, this story too, rattles me each time I think of it now. A leading group of neighbors, predominantly men as is the custom, came together and staged an intervention to help my family (a few weeks before our escape). These neighbors and friends had realized that our family was heading towards disaster and that we were not capable of finding an internal solution. They suggested different options for my mother to remain in the neighborhood and to continue seeing her children and running the household. They offered a space for her to live nearby our house with minimal interaction with my father. However, my father rejected all offers, all

[1] On a side note, my mother also went to a Syrian Women's Organization, and they regretfully told her that they could not find a legal solution for her situation either. They had a rather unusual proposal though: they offered to send someone from the secret police to scare my father into submission and better behavior. My mother politely declined the offer. She found it too risky and fraught with too many possibilities of backfiring and causing even more violence from my father.

possibilities. Hearing my mother tell this story, how these friendly neighbors gathered in our living room to offer shelter for my mother and help to keep our family somewhat intact, I finally realized that my anger at Syria as a whole should really only be aimed at my Syrian family, my father's extended family, who had not done any of those things. But my second insight was just as significant. My Syrian family had not been able to provide protection, comfort, or any type of answer because their profound dysfunctionality had rendered them incapable of making wise decisions and offering sensible solutions.

My paternal grandmother was orphaned at a young age, perfunctorily looked after by extended family, and then married off when she was fourteen years old to a much older man, who already had a child from his deceased first wife. He worked as a literacy teacher for Bedouin military men in Jordan, which meant that my young and inexperienced grandmother raised her stepson and her birth children practically alone. Her husband would come home for visits, always just long enough to father another child. I do not know how many miscarriages or still births she had, but my mother informed me that seven of my grandmother's children made it into adulthood. My grandfather died relatively early (he was already deceased before my mother moved to Syria), leaving my grandmother a widow at a relatively early age in her life, probably about the age he was when he married her. My grandmother, ever so the matriarch of our family, was a very mercurial person and poorly equipped to raise children and be a nurturing mother. Consequently, several of her children developed psychological and psychosomatic problems, and my father exhibited his anger through violence against younger family members, which was sanctioned and practiced within the family. For

example, children would be reprimanded and warned not to misbehave; otherwise, uncle Said (my father) would punish them. It was too late for the family to intervene once they realized that my father's violence had become pathological. By then, everyone in the family feared him, and they had likewise rationalized his behavior to not take responsibility in creating this apparent monster. It would have been unthinkable for my father's family to seek outside help for his mental illness and our family's dysfunction. Syrians, still to this day, do not approve of the breaking of silences and airing out family secrets in public (or even in the privacy of a professional psychiatric office).[2]

This insight into my family's history has freed me to have a more nuanced perspective on my upbringing. It has been one of the stepping stones in the process of healing my trauma of leaving my childhood home, fleeing my father, and making a new life in Germany with my mother and brother. My personal trauma of escaping and the stages of assimilation into a new culture make me particularly sensitive to the plight of refugees, and many aspects of my journey out of Syria and creating a new life in West Germany reflect the Syrian refugee experience. I celebrated my eighth birthday during our escape, and I find my eight-year-old self often reflected in much of the Syrian refugee literature. Furthermore, reading the works has made me realize how agency plays an important role in the experience of refugees and how the lack of agency negatively affects children, young adults, and their families. Additionally, I have learned that agency is linked to the connection humans form with their families and communities. Agency is

[2] See Asli Cennet Yalim and Isok Kim's article "Mental Health and Psychological Needs of Syrian Refugees: A Literature Review and Future Directions" for further information on the mental health stigma within the Syrian culture.

not a solitary endeavor but embedded in the web of social relations. Repeatedly in the literature, the characters depend on the help of others. This support allows them to make decisions and remain hopeful and resilient through their human connections. My mother, brother, and I received support in Syria and Germany, sometimes from unexpected places, enabling us to continue believing in the goodness of the world and to exercise agancy in our lives.

Another reason that I undertook this dissertation topic is the fact that I became a parent myself, which has given me a new way to look back at my own parents and my early childhood. Motherhood has profoundly changed me in ways I would never have expected. Of course, I have the usual feelings of worry and love, attachment and terror of any injuries to my baby that any good mother has. I am struggling with patience and understanding, with comprehending developmental stages, and with trying to be the best mother I can be. But I also have found myself desiring closure of my own childhood traumas and a need to make peace with a past punctured by grief and loss, seeking forgiveness and understanding in order to raise a daughter free of my emotional baggage.

Something else astonishing happened. While being a parent to my daughter, I suddenly understood the work, time, energy, and *love* my parents had provided to bring me up. Most of my memories of my father had been negative, scary, and linked to fear and anger. I have no memories of normal, everyday life. I always knew in my logical mind that we had ordinary days, but my memory could not conjure them. However, when I became a parent and saw my husband and myself perform the daily tasks needed to care for a child—change diapers, feed, soothe, and such—but also show the love involved in

these activities and experience the pleasure in playing with one's child, chasing her, singing with her, etc., I realized that my father had done all these things. He had most days been a loving father to me. Unfortunately, the crazy, frightening moments in which he had threatened or hurt my mother and brother had overtaken most of my memories. These times had left me with a singular impression of a man deranged and terrifying, not the complex picture of a father who at times terrorized his family but at other times was loving and *normal*. This combination of realizing the nuances in my father as a person and parental figure, as well as the nuanced responses of Syrians to our family's plight, happened parallel in my mind. And though these new insights are relatively speaking recent, they have profoundly changed me in my relationship to my Syrian culture and my own identity.

Mary Karr describes this process of change and truth finding very accurately in *The Art of Memoir*. Karr stresses continuously to remain as accurate and close to the truth as memory allows; and like her, I too consult my mother regularly about dates, events, people, and my mother's thoughts and feelings. Consulting others for truth finding is one of the most significant tools Karr employs. Another tool is the emotional willingness and emotional labor involved in questioning one's thoughts and feelings and measuring them up against new information. She states that "Many of the truths a memoirist starts out believing morph into something wholly other. Again: anybody maladroit at apology or changing her mind just isn't bent for the fluid psychological state that makes truth discoverable" (152). I am happy to report that I found myself psychologically equipped for this truth finding journey since my mother's stories truly shifted my perspective on Syria, the culture, and its people. Karr describes memory as "a snow globe that invariably

gets shaken so as to shroud the events inside," and I have discovered my ability to change my mind about some of my interpretations of the past, and I was and am willing to reexamine my memories and feelings for their accuracy (252).

My identity as a refugee, though shifting with time, always remained part of my emotional and psychic self even when I was perceived as a native German by Germans and others alike. Also, the need to process my trauma and to assimilate shaped me in my identity formation. I had the benefit of a German mother who was able to obtain our German citizen rights and who helped me navigate this new environment at least linguistically. However, complicating our story is the fact that she was originally from East Germany, and when we fled Syria, we went to West Germany, a place very strange to my mother indeed. My early negative experiences in Germany, such as being bullied mercilessly at school for my inability to speak German, also shaped my perspective on Germans for the years to come. I never fully embraced my German heritage; while at the same time, I had lost my Syrian identity. Germany's reaction, especially Germany's former chancellor Angela Merkel's response in the early years of the Syrian Civil War (approximately 2011-2015) to the Syrian refugee crisis, has brought some conciliatory feelings for me since I started my research for my dissertation. It was a flawed response, and there were some major setbacks, and yet, *and yet*, Merkel and Germany accepted Syrian refugees (most times) with open arms and a humanitarian heart that made me proud to be German. Merkel's response was so heartfelt that Syrian refugees started calling her "Mama Merkel" or "Mutti Merkel" (the German equivalent of mama). For the first time, I was honored to be a German, to share ancestry from a country that welcomed Syrian refugees.

Most Syrian children and young adults navigating their status as a refugee do not have as much parental support as I have had because their parents are lacking my mother's language abilities and citizen status. On the contrary, many of the children and young adults must take on adult roles to support the family and find their new station in life. Moreover, the status of a being a refugee alone strips most humans of agency. William Maley in *What is a Refugee?* explains, "As a category, of course, 'refugees' do not constitute an actor. To be an actor, it is necessary to be able to make decisions and undertake actions, and as a global category 'refugees' can do neither" (150). Though, he continues, "Individual refugees, however, can be powerful in their own ways" (150). Maley then refers to famous refugees, such as the writer Thomas Mann. I am by no means dismissive of larger-than-life figures such as Thomas Mann, but my interest within the dissertation has been primarily in the "smaller" voices of children and young adults (though some became famous refugees, such as Mustafa and Mardini)—what choices they have, and what agency they represent for themselves, their families, internally and externally, and so on.

Maram al-Masri is a Syrian-born writer living in exile in Paris, France. In her poetry collection *The Abduction* she describes how her husband unexpectedly kidnapped their eighteen-month-old son when she was asking for a marital separation, how she spent the succeeding years longing for her child, and the emotional difficulties when, at the age of thirteen, her son reunited with his mother ("Forword," *The Abduction* 6):

I wait for you when I wake
I wait for you when I sleep
I wait for you when I smile
I wait for you when I weep

I wait for you
When I do not wait for you
I wait for you like a page in a book
like a hunger of long duration
I wait for you like a breast engorged with milk
I wait for you like a flood
I wait for you like a party dress
I wait for you like a letter unread
I wait for you like hope
I wait for you like a hot meal
I wait for you like a daybreak
I wait for you
like a mother
(40)

My mother spent several years of her life in Syria with a cruel and volatile husband to make sure she would not lose her two children. She also lived in fear of him kidnapping me (my brother was already of age) after we left Syria. When my mother made it to West Germany with us, she filed for a divorce, and my father had the right to participate in the legal proceedings in person. My mother's angst was to experience Maram al-Masri's situation and feelings. I had been instructed repeatedly to be watchful. I, too, had lived with the fear of being kidnapped, and for many years my nightmares were riddled with anxiety of abductions as well as fleeing one's country. My father remarried shortly after the divorce, which put my mother's and my fears at ease that he would most likely not come for me. His new wife had been found by my father's family. She comes from a prominent family in our region. My father's family had been driven mad by his incessant presence in their houses, and they had decided that a new wife would keep him occupied. The new wife is thirteen years younger, and she had divorced her previous husband due to his infertility. She knew that my father did not have this medical problem and that he would be on his best behavior since she had a powerful family of origin backing her and

also because my father wanted to prove to the world that he had done nothing wrong in his marriage with my mother.

HOME

I spent the first eight years of my life living under two dictators. Hafez al-Assad held all of Syria under his tight grip, including my family, and my father held our little family in his. The common Syrian maxim that the "walls have ears" was familiar to me at a young age. I could not have put into words the terror everyone felt under the jovial façade of everyday life, but I felt in my bones that the ubiquitous photographs of Assad were not conjuring loving feelings and that the citizens were on edge, always walking on eggshells. This was also the case at home. I never knew what gesture or word might catapult my father into one of his raging fits. In true dictator-fashion, he was unpredictable and left the rest of us in a permanent state of nervousness. Unlike most of the protagonists I discussed in the preceding pages, my home life was volatile. But like most of the characters' families, my mother was an emotionally stable and loving parent and, therefore, enabled me to form a strong attachment towards her. The importance of this secure attachment is documented not only in Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* (and discussed in the previous chapters), but echoed in other modern psychological works, such as Gabor Maté's *When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress* (published 2019) and Joachim Bauer's *Das Gedächtnis des Körpers: Wie Beziehungen und Lebensstile unsere Gene steuern* (*The Body's Memory: How Relationships and Lifestyles Influence Our Genes*, translation mine, published 2004). Moreover, despite my extended

family's inability to intervene on my mother's and her children's behalf, and the community's helplessness to convince my father to find a solution, they were loving towards me, providing me with a foundation of which I could build trust, resilience, and ultimately agency.

Therefore, the obvious parallels between the protagonists and myself were multifaceted. I had lived under the same dictatorial family (the Assads), with the same limited political resources. Additionally, my mother's emotional stability created the needed emotional foundation for me to develop into a strong person who could make her own choices. Furthermore, the emotive support from my extended family and Syrian community supplemented further the process of agency and the ability to deal with the domestic as well as the flight trauma. Despite the unstable home situation, I had been a happy, social child, who was well embedded in her family and community. Moreover, realizing my mother's situation, I had informed her—after my father's attempt to strangle her, which I had witnessed and had been able to stop by calling for my brother—that I would understand if she needed to leave me behind to save her own life and return to our East German family.

JOURNEY

On April 22, 1986, my mother woke me up early in the morning. She informed me that we would be going on an exciting shopping trip. My father and brother had already left the house, I presumed to follow their usual every day activities. My mother had in previous days given a few precious personal items to friends, asking them to hold

onto them for safekeeping. She also had told her closest friends that she would at some point leave, but she did not share when and how she was planning her escape. She wanted to make sure that if pressured none of her friends could reveal any information, and she did not want to burden anyone with secret knowledge. My mother staged her flight within what seemed to be a regular day; therefore, if we were to get caught, nobody could prove that she had tried to escape. Hence, my mother and I left the house with the proverbial "only the clothes on our backs," her purse, and some random doll for me (in her fearful preparations to leave the house, she did not grab my favorite stuffed animal but some random toy). We laugh about this now, but then, once I had discovered my mother's scheme, I was not amused that she had left behind my beloved stuffed animal.

My mother and I met our rescue helper, Frau Chance (name changed), in downtown Damascus. She had borrowed a car for this occasion. My mother and Frau Chance were barely more than acquaintances. They had met at German social functions organized by the Goethe Institute in Damascus a while before this time, and my mother knew that Frau Chance worked for the West German embassy. My mother was not able to go to the embassy herself since someone there knew my father and would have reported to him if she had been seen there. Thus, my mother shared her problems with Frau Chance and asked if she would discuss her situation with the ambassador. The ambassador informed Frau Chance that his agency would not get involved in domestic disputes that had political consequences. Frau Chance took it upon herself then to verify my mother's story (by interviewing my mother's coworkers and friends) and decided that she would risk her own life to smuggle us out of Syria. Both women sat in the front, I was in the back seat, and they instructed me to only speak German. They repeated my

mother's story of a shopping trip and that we were traveling to Beirut, Lebanon for special items. At the time of our journey, Lebanon was in the midst of its own civil war. However, rich, especially European, women still traveled there at times to purchase luxury items. The story was thus not entirely improbable though anyone with a keen sense of observation could have easily noticed that we did not appear rich or suave enough for such an endeavor.

My mother's and Frau Chance's fears were palpable, and soon I knew that something was wrong. The two women were worried that during the frequent military stops, some military personnel would decide to contact my father and that the ruse would be discovered, or that one of these stops would turn out to be a ruse in itself, and we would all get abducted by militia and held for ransom. I remember vividly feeling small and tiny, barely able to peer out of the back passenger window at men dressed in military garb with huge rifles and guns. I recall the unspoken terror permeating the car every time we were stopped and the pretense of cheerfulness of two women—one a stranger and the other my mother—and my own utter inexplicable anxiety and confusion since I did not know what was happening. I was a very chatty and curious child, but on this day, I intuitively realized that I had to hold my tongue and save my inquiries for later.

After several hours, we made it to Beirut. Frau Chance dropped us off at a building next to the German church within walking distance of the West German embassy. The pastor and his assistant were expecting us. They had been informed by Frau Chance via phone and fax previously. The pastor had planned to meet us at the border, but he was under recent strict orders not to travel since the militia kidnappings of

foreigners had at the time increased. My mother, the pastor, and his assistant watched with great trepidation as Frau Chance returned to Syria, and they were very relieved when they received a fax from her the next day saying that she had made it back safely. In the meantime, my brother had taken a bus from Damascus to Beirut, and unbeknownst to me, my mother spent two of the worst hours of her life in fear waiting for him to make it to our refuge. The pastor and his assistant brought us into a small room, which would become our sanctuary for the next two and a half weeks. We were able to move freely through the two-story building most of the time but had to be quiet and hidden when there were any visitors (such as a women's group meeting). My mother contacted the West German embassy to get passports and visas and borrowed a lot of money from them to be able to get us to Germany, money she would spend years paying back. The district we were hiding, which also included the airport, was controlled by the Syrian army.[3] Therefore, once our papers were in order, the embassy shuttled us to a Christian-militia-controlled district where we spent one night hiding in a hospital room, took the ferry to Cyprus, spent another night there (this time in a regular hotel), and then finally boarded an airplane to Frankfurt, Germany. Since we were in a Syrian-occupied and controlled district, my mother and brother became alarmed every time a military vehicle stopped in the dead-end street where we were located. They did not share their thoughts with me, and they tried to remain as cheerful as possible. But I recall the terror created by military vehicles as a deep-seated anxiety; to this day, I feel dread and fear when I see tanks and

[3] See Alia Malek's memoir *The Home that Was Our Country* for some insightful descriptions of the situation in Beirut at the time, the explanation of the "Green Line" (158), the division of the country by political and ethnic factions, and the social and emotional consequences of the civil war for the Lebanese and Syrian civilians.

other armed automobiles. Two and a half weeks does not seem very long, but when it is permeated with daily fear, it is like an eternity. Also, crossing the "Green Line" that separated West and East Beirut to get to the harbor was frightening and remains embedded in my memory as one of the scariest moments of my life, as I was crouched down in the car, trying to remain inconspicuous, and feeling like an exposed target.

Our journey from Syria to Germany resembles journeys inscribed in some of the literary accounts I read and analyzed in the dissertation. Like most Syrian refugees from the Syrian civil war, my mother did not leave our beloved Syria until it was too dangerous to stay. The risk of the flight had become less perilous than remaining. Additionally, we departed with hardly any belongings—I had only the clothes I was wearing—though I received a few items from the pastor's assistant once we were in hiding, my brother had one duffle bag of clothes, and my mother a small suitcase provided by the thoughtful Frau Chance filled with outfits from her own closet. And like many of the refugees in the stories I described, we were nearly penniless. My father had been controlling all finances in recent times, leaving my mother unable to hide money or withdraw any for our escape. Moreover, our fears and trepidations resemble to some of the protagonists' terror of fleeing militia controlled areas and hiding quietly while planning the next step in their journey to safety. Additionally, we likewise had some wonderful people risk their lives and livelihoods to help and protect us. Comparable to some of the characters' perceptions in the novels and memoirs, my mother to this day encourages us to focus on the helpers in every hardship. My brother, mother, and I were fortunate to receive support and care from friends and strangers during our escape. This

connectedness to others enabled us to remain hopeful and able to act throughout our flight and beyond.

RESETTLEMENT

Once we landed in Frankfurt, Germany, my mother contacted an old friend of hers Brigitte, whose parents were originally from East Germany but had resettled in West Germany when the borders were still fluid. Brigitte and my mother had remained in contact over the years, especially when Brigitte had found herself lonely and without friends in West Germany. She was still able to visit her grandparents in East Germany and would coordinate her trips to see my mother, who would also visit her family every other year or so. Brigitte had never met my father, and he did not know about her. Brigitte and her husband had established themselves in very comfortable circumstances through their privately owned house painting company. Brigitte had even agreed to take my brother in and to help him find an apprenticeship once he had graduated high school and was of age. She was expecting to receive notice from my mother soon to make arrangements, knowing that my brother had turned eighteen in March. What she did not expect was a call from my mother telling her that all three of us were at the Frankfurt airport. Brigitte and her husband rose to the occasion magnanimously. They picked us up and invited us into their large middle-class house in the small German town of Ingelheim. Unfortunately, what had begun as a generous invitation turned into an abusive situation. They were using my mother as a housekeeper, secretary for their business, and nanny to their toddler though she had barely recovered from back surgery a few months prior, and

my brother was used as free labor in their business. They purposefully withheld information about our rights as reunited German citizens and our claims to monetary and social support from the government in order to keep us as cheap labor in their house and business. Brigitte also tried to make my mother feel guilty for accepting money and support from the German government, but she did not mind taking some of that money as rent. Moreover, their marriage had apparently been strained for a long time, and our appearance in their house became yet another reason for them to argue, which they did loudly and frequently, regardless of our nearby presence.

Slowly, my mother pieced together information to help her find affordable housing, work, some social welfare, and so on for us to leave Brigitte's house. Deplorably, the employees at the German governmental agencies were not very forthcoming with services that we were entitled to according to German laws. We did not receive some of the services because we did not know about them. My mother learned about them years later when she became a refugee advocate and informal translator during her volunteer work. In the meantime, my brother who, due to his severe colorblindness, was not suited for work in the paining industry, was placed by a German agency in a trade training school to become a car mechanic, something that was unfortunately also a profession for which he was ill-suited. Masen had been a Judo champion in Syria and participated some competitions once we lived in Germany until physical injuries halted his athletic career. Still, he remained always active and preferred work that involved physical fitness. He wanted to become a physical therapist, a profession that would have matched his uncanny abilities to detect and treat other people's illnesses. On a positive note, after two decades in unsuited jobs, Masen re-

schooled himself; he is now a life guard at a lake and a massage therapist, with some intuitive knowledge to heal orthopedic, spinal, and muscular injuries. My mother's professional journey was less erratic but strenuous nevertheless. She worked as a psychiatric nurse initially and then got funding to go back to school to become a teacher for nursing with a specialization in psychiatry. Ultimately, she ran her own psychiatric school for nurses who wanted special certification in the psychiatric field.

My early school experiences in Germany shaped much of my attitude about the country and its people. I was mercilessly bullied by my classmates for being perceived as a foreigner with limited linguistic abilities. Though I could understand much German, my primary language had been Syrian Arabic, and I, therefore, had to learn to speak my mother's tongue fluently, a process that took some time. Regrettably, my teachers were not much kinder than my schoolmates; they had no patience, educational awareness, or empathy for an eight-year-old struggling to integrate into a new culture and to learn to use the language effortlessly. At the same time, the bullies also terrorized other kids (for whatever perceived inadequacies), and the teachers mostly looked away. My solution was to band all of the bullied together and get back at the bullies. However, the other oppressed children were too scared, and I lacked the ability to motivate them for an uprising. I had intentions to exercise my agency, but unfortunately, I was lacking the charisma to implement them. Instead, I used my mother's suggestion and one-by-one invited each bully over to my house, and surprisingly, they came. My mother's idea had been that if the bullies would get to know me on a personal, more intimate level, they would cease to terrorize me. Astonishingly, my mother's strategy worked. I even became friends with one of them, but the rest at least remained neutral towards me after the home

visit. Perhaps learning some of their secrets equalized us in their eyes. For example, one saw a therapist for continued bedwetting, one had severe attention deficit disorder, one came from a troubled family—and my friend turned out to be too smart for his own good. He was underchallenged in school, which made him display inappropriate behaviors.

The German school system at the time was tiered with three sections that were based on the student's abilities, something that was determined in fourth grade. Based on one's performance and grades, the teachers made recommendations for a student to either to go on to a school that finishes at ninth grade (and prepares the student for menial work), attend a school that graduates students at tenth grade (and prepares them for trade school), or go to a Gymnasium, in which students finish thirteen grades and are able to apply for university. My elementary school teacher recommended that I would only go through ninth grade. I remember being deeply offended and hurt; I also was terrified of finding myself with this kind of students in one classroom. I knew which kids made it to this particular school—the troublemakers, the ones with severe undiagnosed and untreated learning disorders, the bullies, and so on. My mother and I decided to challenge the teacher's recommendation, so we argued and fought with her. Correspondingly, I took extra testing to prove that my abilities were sufficient to make it into a higher school. This actions paid off. I was permitted to go to the Gymnasium. By then I sounded like a German native, and my new classmates and teachers did not treat me as an outsider. However, my previous suffering at the hands of class bullies and teachers had etched itself into my identity. To this day, I struggle with feeling completely German, with identifying with a people who at one point had shown me such injustice. I realize that confirmation bias clouds my judgements, but every time I hear of Germans acting

racially discriminatory, it confirms my own ideas about their inherent racism and unkindness. I fight hard to combat these negative stereotypes, and I remind myself of all the wonderful Germans who helped us escape and forge a new beginning.

Like the characters in the novels and memoirs, my family and I struggled not only with our professional and educational beginnings, but also with poverty, flight trauma, and adjusting to a country that was not our beloved Syria. Moreover, we were all processing our father's domestic violence in different ways. My brother initially had taken the role of the aggressor (a process, I have learned to understand, is rather common for males who were victims once) when we came to Germany, making my mother's and my life extremely problematic. Also, my brother identified himself as a Syrian, a Muslim, and the head of the household, and he struggled with finding his new role, considering it did not accord well with my mother's and my own perceptions. We were becoming increasingly Westernized and had abandoned most Arab cultural norms. At the same time, I was desperately trying to assimilate and had rejected all things Syrian, which I identified with my deranged father and a society that had not protected us. To this day, my brother and I have divergent cultural values that seem unbridgeable; we just have found ways to avoid issues that remind us of them. We also evade speaking much about the past. Our memories of the same events are absurdly different, enraging the other when shared.

My brother went back to visit our father years after we left him. He was initially warmly welcomed, but my father, with his mercurial disposition, then became distant and cold, and currently they are estranged from one another. My brother is also still in active

contact with the rest of our Syrian family. Several of our cousins have immigrated to the Netherlands (prior to the war), and my brother visits them regularly, and they come to see him at times. He continues to yearn for the warmth of a Syrian family filled with joy and laughter, sharing delicious foods, and a festive mood, sitting in a large circle, surrounded by kids and adults. I, too, miss these moments when our extended family would get together to celebrate a holiday or merely enjoy each other's company, but I have stopped idealizing our extended family. I have instead tried to find a more nuanced perspective about our life in Syria, the years in Germany, and now my life in the United States. I believe that my brother is idealizing Syrian culture, scorning German or Western values, and constantly criticizing my mother because he has not dealt with his anger properly. I know this because, for the longest time, I, too, was struggling with anger. I harbored much anger towards my mother for having stayed with our abusive father for so long. In the process of this dissertation writing, though, I have come to understand her motivations and decisions better. My mother's formative years were all spent in a dictatorship. Her father was authoritarian, easily angered, and reacted very violently to any perceived disobedience. Moreover, East Germany was a so-called Communist state, but in reality, it was a dictatorship, a totalitarian system that had very little resemblance to Communist principles. Hence, my mother had been primed from early on to perceive authoritarian regimes as standard and living with a personal dictator as normal. Additionally, my mother's paternal grandparents had been very devoutly Christian, and they instilled in her an endless supply of hope that things will get better, that with work and the right attitude, everything is manageable, and that one does not leave one's spouse. It took her years, and almost her own life and that of her son's, to release herself

from the mental shackles of religion and tyranny and to find a way to escape her abusive husband. Likewise, on a practical level, my father was making a departure for her more difficult each passing year; he probably sensed my mother's discontent. For example, he would only allow her to take me (and not my brother) with her on visits to East Germany, knowing that that would make our mother return to Syria and not abandon her teenage son.

Unfortunately, like most children of an abusive parent, both my brother and I sought out partners who resembled our previous oppressor in their abusive treatment of us. My first marriage in my early twenties was with an American, who, like my father, was very charismatic, smart, manipulative, emotionally unstable, mentally ill, *and* abusive. My brother's choices for his two first marriages were equally disastrous. On a positive note, we both have processed much of our trauma over the years and have managed to be in loving, healthy marriages now. My brother's German wife does not seem bothered by his occasional display of machismo and criticism of Germany; instead, she is deeply in love with his positive attributes and adores him. My loving and devoted American husband has enabled me to take the time to write my dissertation and process my trauma. I am saddened that my father deprived me of a stable childhood and, by extension, of my Syrian family and identity. Though I have gained greater understanding during the dissertation process of my extended family's shortcomings in protecting us from my father, I do not wish to revive my relations with them. This disconnect from my Syrian past and current family is probably the largest difference between me and the protagonists of the texts discussed in my dissertation.

Nujeen Mustafa ponders at the end of her young adult memoir *The Girl from Aleppo*, "And I wonder. If we ever go back, will we recognize each other? I have changed and my country has changed" (267). This musing is at the heart of the refugee experience, a questioning of one's identity that has been affected by a volatile home country, escape trauma, and being forced to cope with a resettlement process. Nevertheless, even now, decades after our escape from Syria, I have many commonalities with the characters' relationship to our country of origin, besides the narrative of our escape: I delight in the smell of jasmine, I cherish Syrian food, I still enjoy Arabic music, and I find the language melodious and warmly familiar. Likewise, when the characters express their longing for their beloved Syria, I, too, know that pull at the heartstrings, and cannot help but yearn with them; I weep with them that our homeland has been in part destroyed beyond recognition. At the same time, I share the authors' and protagonists' optimism for a better future. I continue to believe that even a country as damaged as Syria can rise from the ashes through love, individual choices, the human spirit, and hopefully some savvy political decisions. Reading the literature and doing the research for this dissertation, as well as my own healing, has made me realize that though we expats have changed and our country has changed, what has remained is our willingness to rebuild and a refusal to give up. I am my mother's daughter, and I, too, am filled with endless hope.

WORKS CITED

"*A House without Walls*." *Kirkus Reviews*, vol. 89, no. 3, Feb. 2021. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=148354187&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 29 Nov. 2022.

"A Syrian Orphan Alone in Brussels in '*Nowhere Boy.*'" *Morning Edition*, 3 Sept. 2018. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A552774215/AONE?u=tel_middleten&sid=ebsco&xid=32a4dbf1. Accessed 30 Jan. 2023.

Abawi, Atia. *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*. Penguin Random House, 2018.

"Abu Dhabi International Book Fair 2017: Nadine Kaadan reveals how Damascus inspired her to write." *National* [Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates], 29 Apr. 2017. *Gale OneFile: News*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A495090518/STND?u=tel_middleten&sid=ebsco&xid=e72e1d40. Accessed 24 June 2022.

Adams, Jenni. "'Into Eternity's Certain Breadth': Ambivalent Escapes in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 41, no. 3, Sept. 2010, pp. 222–33. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1007/s10583-010-9111-2. Accessed 21 Oct. 2022.

Adji, Alberta Natasia. "Youth Matters: Shedding Light on Displacement in Syrian Girls' Memoirs." *Life Writing*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2021, pp. 225-41, https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2019.1658505. Accessed 24 June 2022.

Alabed, Bana. *Dear World: A Syrian Girl's Story of War and Plea for Peace*. Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2017.

---. *My Name Is Bana*. illus. by Nez Riaz. Slaam Reads, 2021.

Alali, Nather Henafe. "Ein Stück Kuchen im Dreck." Translated by Rafael Sánchez. *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Dienstag, 13 July 2021. 77 Jahrgang, NR. 159. pp. 22-23.

AlAmmouri, Bayan. "Privatizing Refugees' Human Rights in Hamid's *Exit West*, Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus and The Schooldays of Jesus*, and Hosseini's *Sea Prayer*." *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies (IJAES)*, vol. 20, no.2, 2020, pp. 205-222, https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.20.2.11. Accessed 30 Aug. 2022.

Alexander, Jeffrey et al. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. U of California P, 2004.

Allen, Autumn. "Review of *Other Words for Home*." *Horn Book Magazine*, vol. 96, no. 4, July 2020, pp. 44–45. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=144415949&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 15 Feb. 2023.

Al-Masri, Maram. *The Abduction*. Translated by Theo Dorgan. Southword Editions, 2020.

Alter, Alexandra. "Children's Books Wade into Refugee Territory." *New York Times*, vol. 166, no. 57682, Aug. 2017, pp. C1–4. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=124488989&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 9 Nov. 2022.

Anam, Nasia. "Encampment as Colonization: Theorizing the Representation of Refugee Spaces." *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 50, no. 3, Fall 2020, pp. 405-36. *Project Muse*, https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2020.0015. Accessed 24 June 2022.

Annable, Linda. “My Name Is Bana.” *School Library Journal*, vol. 67, no. 10, Oct. 2021, p. 99. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=llf&AN=152568564&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 24 June 2022.

Arizpe, Evelyn. “Migrant Shoes and Forced Walking in Children’s Literature about Refugees: Material Testimony and Embodied Simulation.” *Migration Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, Sept. 2021, pp. 1343–60. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1093/migration/mnz047. Accessed 4 Nov. 2022.

---. “*Refugee*. By Alan Gratz.” *Migration Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, Mar. 2020, pp. 131-33. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1093/migration/mny007. Accessed 1 Nov. 2022.

Attebery, Brian. “Introduction: But Why Does It Have to Be Political?” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2021, pp. 321-24.

Azzam, Julie Hakim. “The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees.” *Horn Book Magazine*, vol. 94, no. 5, Sept. 2018, pp. 104–05. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohostcom.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=131301667&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 25 Aug. 2022.

Baer, Elizabeth Roberts. “A New Algorithm in Evil: Children’s Literature in a Post-Holocaust World.” *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 24, no. 3, Sept. 2000, pp. 378-401. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1353/uni.2000.0026. Accessed 4 Aug. 2022.

Bakara, Hadji. "Introduction: Refugee Literatures." *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 50, no. 3, fall 2020, pp. 289-96. *Project Muse*, https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2020.0016. Accessed 11 May 2022.

Balaev, Michelle. *Contemporary Approaches to Literary Trauma Theory*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Barthelmess, Thom. "*The Journey*." *The Horn Book Magazine*, vol. 93, no. 2, Mar. 2017, p. 77. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsglr&AN=edsglr.A485970940&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 27 Sept. 2022.

Bauer, Joachim. *Das Gedächtnis des Körpers: Wie Beziehungen und Lebensstile unsere Gene steuern*. (*The Body's Memory: How Relationships and Lifestyles Influence Our Genes*, translation mine). Piper, 2004.

Berlatsky, Noah. *Syria* (*Opposing Viewpoints)*. Greenhaven Press, 2015.

Bhimji, Fazila. "Visibilities and the Politics of Space: Refugee Activism in Berlin." *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, vol. 14, no. 4, Oct. 2016, pp. 432-50. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1080/15562948.2016.1145777. Accessed 4 Ma. 2022.

Bosmajian, Hamida. *Sparing the Child: Grief and the Unspeakable in Youth Literature about Nazism and the Holocaust*. Routledge, New York, 2002.

Braun-Lewensohn, Orna, and Khaled Al-Sayed. "Syrian Adolescent Refugees: How Do They Cope During Their Stay in Refugee Camps?" *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 9, July 2018. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01258. Accessed 4 Ma. 2022.

Brown, Don. *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018.

Buelens, Gert, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone, editors. *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*. Routledge, 2014.

Bush, Elizabeth. "*The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees* by Don Brown (Review)." *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, vol. 72, no. 4, Nov. 2018, p. 158. *EBSCOhost,* https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1353/bcc.2018.0818. Accessed 24 June 2022.

Caruth, Cathy. *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2014.

---. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2016.

Cavazzoni, Federica, et al. "Alternative Ways of Capturing the Legacies of Traumatic Events: A Literature Review of Agency of Children Living in Countries Affected by Political Violence and Armed Conflicts." *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, vol. 23, no. 2, Apr. 2022, pp. 555–66. *EBSCOhost,* https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1177/1524838020961878. Accessed 24 June 2022.

Chapman, Madeleine. "Feminist Dilemmas and the Agency of Veiled Muslim Women: Analysing Identities and Social Representations." *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3, Aug. 2016, pp. 237–50. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1177/1350506815605346. Accessed 15 Feb. 2023.

Chaudhri, Amina. "*Other Words for Home*." *Booklist,* vol. 115, no. 16, Apr. 2019, pp. 74–76. *EBSCOhost,*

search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=135905389&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 15 Feb. 2023

Chauvin, Zachary. "Gratz, Alan: *Refugee*." *Resource Links*, vol. 24, no. 4, Apr. 2019, p. 40. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsgao&AN=edsgcl.587655193&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 1 Nov. 2022.

Christiansen, Lynn V. "Saving Stella: A Dog's Dramatic Escape from War." *School Library Journal*, vol. 66, no. 10, Oct. 2020, p. 92. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohostcom.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=trh&AN=146047792&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 3 May 2022.

CNN Wire. "7-Year-Old Syrian Refugee Bana Alabed Gets Turkish ID." *CCN Wire*, 12 May 2017. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com//apps/doc/A491598948/AONE?u=tel_middleten&sid=ebsco&xid=1461d325. Accessed 24 Mar. 2022.

Colaiacovo, Natalie. "Kullab, Samya. *Escape from Syria*." *Resource Links*, vol. 23, no. 3, Feb. 2018, p. 30. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsgao&AN=edsgcl.530467616&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 24 Mar. 2022.

Crabapple, Molly. "Where Else Can They Go?" *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 65, no. 19, Dec. 2018, p. 14. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsgao&AN=edsgcl.563345579&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 9 Aug. 2022.

Daou, Kim Roger Abi Zeid, Léa Roger Abi Zeid Daou, and Maxime Cousineau- Pérusse. "Storytelling as a Tool: A Family-Based Intervention for Newly Resettled Syrian Refugee Children." *International Journal of Social Welfare*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2022, pp. 56–65. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12476. Accessed 7 June 2022.

Davis, Colin, and Hanna Meretoja. *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*. Routledge, 2020.

Dawes, James. *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity*. Harvard University Press, 2007. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=282392&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 3 Ma. 2022.

Demetriou, Simon. "Book review: *Welcome to Nowhere* by Elizabeth Laird." *Cyprus Mail [Cyprus]*, 6 Sept. 2022. *Gale OneFile: News*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A716219811/STND?u=tel_a_beaman&sid=bookmark-STND&xid=0f8848de. Accessed 1 Dec. 2022.

Douglas, Kate. "@Alabedbana: Twitter, the Child, and the War Diary." *Textual Practice*, vol. 34, no. 6, June 2020, pp. 1021–39. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1080/0950236X.2018.1533493. Accessed 11 May 2022.

Dudek, Debra. "Seeing the Human Face: Refugee and Asylum Seeker Narratives and an Ethics of Care in Recent Australian Picture Books." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. Winter 2018, vol. 43, No. 4, pp. 363-73.

Edemir, Ersoy. "Uncovering Community Cultural Wealth Through an Early Intervention Program: Syrian Refugee Children Speaking." *Early Childhood Education*

Journal, vol. 50, no. 2, Feb. 2022, p. 259. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1007/s10643-020-01140-7. Accessed 4 Ma. 2022.

Evans, Kate. *Threads From the Refugee Crisis*. Verso, 2017.

Fakher, Bassel Abou, and Deborah Blumenthal. *Saving Stella: A Dog's Dramatic Escape from War*, illustrated by Nadine Kaadan. Bloomsbury, 2020.

Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Routledge, New York, 1992.

Ferguson, Kristen. *My Beautiful Birds*. *CM: Canadian Review of Materials*, vol. 23, no. 18, Jan. 2017, p. 1. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=121021974&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 12 Dec. 2022.

Feriano, Patricia. "Gratz, Alan. *Refugee*." *School Library Journal*, vol. 63, no. 7, July 2017, p. 72. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsgao&AN=edsgcl.497611096&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 1 Nov. 2022.

"Figures at a Glance." *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*. 16 June, 2022. https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html. Accessed 3 Mar. 2023.

"Five Questions for Don Brown." *Horn Book Magazine*, vol. 94, no. 5, Sept. 2018, p. 40. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=131301584&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 4 Aug. 2022.

Fleming, Melissa. *A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea: One Refugee's Incredible Story of Love, Loss, and Survival*. Flatiron Books, 2017.

Flynn, Richard. "Introduction: Disputing the Role of Agency in Children's Literature and Culture." *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, vol. 8, no. 1, Summer 2016, pp. 248-53. *Project Muse*, https://doi/org/10.1353/jeu.2016.0011.

---. "What Are We Talking about When We Talk about Agency?" *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, vol. 8, issue 1, Summer 2016, pp. 254-65. *Project Muse*, https://doi/org/10.1353/jeu.2016.0012.

Freedman, Jane, Zeynep Kivilcim, and Nurcan Özgür Baklacıoğlu, editors. *A Gendered Approach to the Syrian Refugee Crisis*. Routledge, 2017.

Gibbs, Alan. *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=830678&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 24 Feb. 2023.

Goudeau, Jessica. *After the Last Border: Two Families and the Story of Refuge in America*. Penguin Random House, 2020.

Grochowski, Sara. "Q & A with Alan Gratz." *Publishers Weekly (Online)*, Oct. 2018, p. 1. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=132617130&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 1 Nov. 2022.

---. "Q&A with Jasmine Warga." *Publishers Weekly Online*, 21 May 2019. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A586390616?AONE?u=tel_middleten&sid=ebsco&xid=0c447aea. Accessed 28 March 2022.

Grzegorczyk, Blanka. *Terror and Counter-Terror in Contemporary British Children's Literature*. Routledge, 2020. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat08646a&AN=mtsu.6b888aec.ca04.45f0.875d.bff32b677d22&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 12 Dec. 2022.

Gubar, Marah. "The Hermeneutics of Recuperation: What a Kinship-Model Approach to Children's Agency Could Do for Children's Literature and Childhood Studies." *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, vol. 8, no. 1, Summer 2016, pp. 291-310. *Project Muse*, https://doi/org/10.1353/jeu.2016.0015. Accessed 28 March 2022.

Hammel, Andrea. "Representations of Family in Autobiographical Texts of Child Refugees." *SHOFAR*, vol. 23, no. 1, Fall 2004, pp.121-132. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42943764. Accessed 12 December, 2022.

Hashemi, Manata, and Martín Sánchez-Jankowski. *Children in Crisis: Ethnographic Studies in International Contexts*. Routledge, 2013.

Hassainein, Deana, and Nadda Osman. "*As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*: Syrian Author Zoulfa Katouh on Survivor's Guilt and Hope." *Middle East Eye*. https://www.middleeasteye.net/discover/syria-author-zoulfa-katouh-as-long-as-lemon-trees-grow-review. Updated 30 Sept. 2022. Accessed 27 Feb. 2023.

Hauge, Chelsey. "Girl with a Voice: Bana Alabed's Digital Engagement and Democratic Practice." *Discourse Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, vol. 41, no. 5, pp. 691-707. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2020.1769935. Accessed 28 March 2022.

Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. BasicBooks, 1992.

Hisham, Marwan. *Brothers of the Gun: A Memoir of the Syrian War*, illustrated by Molly Crabapple. One World, 2018.

Hitchcock, Shannon, and N. H. Senzai. *Flying over Water*. Scholastic Inc., 2020.

Hope, Julia. *Children's Literature About Refugees: A Catalyst in the Classroom*. Trentham Books, 2017. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1642862&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 25 Aug. 2022.

---. "'One Day We Had to Run': The Development of the Refugee Identity in Children's Literature and Its Function in Education." *Children's Literature in Education: An International Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 4, Dec. 2008, pp. 295–304. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1007/s10583-008-9072-x. Accessed 29 Nov. 2022.

Holmes, Seth M., and Heide Castañeda. "Representing the 'European Refugee Crisis' in Germany and Beyond: Deservingness and Difference, Life and Death." *American Ethnologist*, vol. 43, no. 1, Feb. 2016, pp. 12–24. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1111/amet.12259. Accessed 4 Ma. 2022.

Houtman, Jacqueline, "Interview with Author N. H. Senzai." *The Mixed Up Files*. https://www.bing.com/search?q=houtman%2C%20jacqueline%20interview%20of%20Senzai&qs=n&form=QBRE&=Search%20%7B0%7D%20for%20%7B1%7D&=Search%20work%20for%20%7B0%7D&=%25eManage%20Your%20Search%20History%25E&sp=1&pq=houtman%2C%20jacqueline%20interview%20of

%20senzai&sc=239&sk=&cvid=D88FAB55703F42E8BA7F321D81EC35A5&ghsh=0&ghacc=0&ghpl=#. Accessed 11 Nov. 2022.

Jacques, Wesley. "*Escape from Aleppo* by N. H. Senzai (Review)." *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, vol. 71, no. 6, Jan. 2018, p. 262. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1353/bcc.2018.0131. Accessed 11 Nov. 2022.

Johnson, Stephanie. "Parry Sound Students Meet Author Behind *Yara, My Friend from Syria*." *Parry Sound North Star* [Parry Sound, Ontario], 8 Feb. 2017, p. 1. *Gale OneFile: News*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A480595050/STND?u=tel_middleten&sid=ebsco&xid=e58f208d. Accessed 12 Jan. 2023.

Johnston, Barbara. "Marsh, Katherine. *Nowhere Boy*." *Voice of Youth Advocates*, vol. 41, no. 3, Aug. 2018, p. 62. *Gale General OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A551167837/ITOF?u=tel_middleten&sid=ebsco&xid=90653143. Accessed 30 Jan. 2023.

Jordan, Sarah D. "Educating Without Overwhelming: Authorial Strategies in Children's Holocaust Literature." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 35. no. 3, Sept 2004, pp. 199-218.

Juris, Carolyn. "Children's Bestsellers." *Publishers Weekly*, vol. 265, no. 32, Aug. 2018, p. 14. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=131098124&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 1 Nov. 2022.

Kaadan, Nadine. *The Jasmine Sneeze*. Lantana Publishing, 2018.

---. *Tomorrow*. Latana Publishing, 2018.

Kahn, Coco. "Onjali Raúf: 'My Mother said Publishing Was a White World, but I Should Always Try.'" 1 May, 2019. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/may /01/onjali-rauf-my-mother-said-publishing-was-a-white-world-but-i-should-always-try. Accessed 28 Ma. 2022.

Karr, Mary. *The Art of Memoir*. HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2015.

Katouh, Zoulfa. *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*. Little, Brown and Company, 2022.

Kertzer, Adrienne. "Cinderella's Stepsisters, Traumatic Memory, and Young People's Writing." *The Lion and the Unicorn: A Critical Journal of Children's Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 1–21. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1353/uni.2016.0004. Accessed 4 Aug. 2022.

---. "'Do You Know What "Auschwitz" Means?': Children's Literature and the Holocaust." *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 23, no. 2, Apr. 1999, pp. 238-56. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1353/uni.1999.0027.

"Khaled Hosseini Says a Succinct 'Sea Prayer' For A Refugee's Journey." *Morning Edition*, Sept. 2018. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsgao&AN=edsgcl.555532914&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 25 Aug. 2022.

Khan, Hiba Noor. "A Little Cat in a Big War." *Yes!* Spring 2021, pp. 70-71.

---. *The Little War Cat*, illustrated by Laura Chamberlain. Macmillan Children's Books, 2020. Accessed 25 Aug. 2022.

Kidd, David Comer, and Emanuele Castano. "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind." *Science*, vol. 342, no. 6156, Oct. 2013, pp. 377–80. *EBSCOhost*,

https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1126/science.1239918. Accessed 4 Nov. 2022.

Kidd, Kenneth B. "'A' Is for Auschwitz: Psychoanalysis, Trauma Theory, and the 'Children's Literature of Atrocity.'" *Children's Literature,* vol. 33, no. 1, June 2005, pp. 120–49. *EBSCOhost,* https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1353/chl.2005.0014. Accessed 25 2022.

"Kingston University Graduate Nadine Kaadan Makes BBC's List of 100 Inspiring and Influential Women of 2020 for Championing Inclusivity in Children's Books." *European Union News*, 23 Dec. 2020. *Gale General OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A646520169/ITOF?u=tel_middleten&sid=ebsco&xid=ed0788de. Accessed 24 June 2022.

Kugler, Olivier. *Escaping Wars and Waves: Encounters with Syrian Refugees*. The Pennsylvania State UP, 2018.

Kullab, Samya. *Escape from Syria*, illustrated by Jackie Roche and Mike Freiheit, Firefly Books Ltd, 2020.

LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2014.

Laird, Elizabeth. *A House Without Walls*. Macmillan Children's Books, 2019.

---. *Welcome to Nowhere*. Macmillan Children's Books, 2017.

---. "How I Came to Write the Book." www.elizabethlarid.co.uk. Accessed 29 Nov. 2022.

Latham, Irene, and Karim Shamis-Basha. *The Cat Man of Aleppo*. illustrated by Yoko-Shimizu. Penguin Random House LLC, 2020.

Lemke, Susan Dove. "*My Beautiful Birds*." *Horn Book Magazine,* vol. 93, no. 2, Mar. 2017, pp. 67–68. *EBSCOhost,* https://search-ebscohost-

com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=121411935&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 12 Dec. 2022.

Lesch, David W. *Syria*. Polity Press, 2019.

Lizzi, Eva. "Representations of the Shoah in Picture Books for Young Children: An Intercultural Comparison." *European Judaism*, vol. 42, no. 1, Mar. 2009, p. 31-48. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.3167/ej.2009.420105. Accessed 4 June 2022.

Luci, Monica. "Displacement as Trauma and Trauma as Displacement in the Experience of Refugees." *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, vol. 65, no. 2, Apr. 2020, pp. 260–80. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1111/1468-5922.12590. Accessed 4 March 2022.

Luckhurst, Roger. "Future Shock: Science Fiction and the Trauma Paradigm." *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, edited by Gert Buelens et al. Routledge, 2014.

Malek, Alia. *The House That Was Our Country: A Memoir of Syria*. Bold Type Books, 2017.

Maley, William. *What is a Refugee?* Oxford UP, 2016.

Mardini, Yusra, and Josie Le Blond. *Butterfly; From Refugee to Olympian—My Story of Rescue, Hope, and Triumph*. St. Martin's Press, 2018.

Marsh, Katherine. *Nowhere Boy*. Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC, 2018.

Martínez García, Ana Belén. "Bana Alabed: Using Twitter to Draw Attention to Human Rights Violations." *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism*, vol. 39, no. 2–3,

Aug. 2017, pp. 132–49. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1080/01440357.2018.1549310. Accessed 28 Ma. 2022.

Maté, Gabor. *When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress*. Vermilion, 2019.

Mathis, Janelle B. "Demonstrations of Agency in Contemporary International Children's Literature: An Exploratory Critical Content Analysis Across Personal, Social, and Cultural Dimensions." *Literacy Research & Instruction*, vol. 54, no. 3, July 2015, pp. 206–30. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1080/19388071.2015.1027021. Accessed 12 Dec. 2022.

Mattawa, Khaled. "Poems." *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 50, no. 3, Sept. 2020, p. 437. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsglr&AN=edsglr.A637719825&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 22 Feb. 2022.

Michelini, Enrico. "The Representation of Yusra Mardini as a Refugee Olympic Athlete: A Sociological Analysis Die Repräsentation von Yusra Mardini Als Refugee Olympic Athlete. Eine Soziologische Analyse." *Sport Und Gesellschaft*, vol. 18, no. 1, Apr. 2021, pp. 39-64. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1515/sug-2021-0003. Accessed 25 Mar. 2022.

Mozer, Matisse. "Kullab, Samya. *Escape from Syria*." *School Library Journal*, vol. 63, no. 12, Dec. 2017, p. 114. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsgao&AN=edsgcl.516634140&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 7 July 2022.

Muller, Robert T. *Trauma and the Struggle to Open Up: From Avoidance to Recovery and Growth*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.

Mustafa, Nujeen, and Christina Lamb. *The Girl from Aleppo: Nujeen's Escape from War to Freedom*. Harper Wave, 2017.

Nel, Philip. "Introduction: Migration, Refugees, and Diaspora in Children's Literature." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 4, winter 2018, pp. 357-62.

Noble, Fiona. "After Her Hit Debut, Onjali Q Rauf Returns to the Story of Refugee Ahmet for World Book Day." *The Bookseller*, no. 5865, Nov. 2019, p. 24. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsglr&AN=edsglr.A607787332&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 28 Mar. 2022.

O'Brien, Sandra. "*Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey*." *Canadian Children's Book News*, vol. 39, no. 3, Fall 2016, p. 30. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=brb&AN=119186714&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 9 Nov. 2022.

Oke, Marylynn Miller. "Kids on Board: Handling the Plight of Refugees with Care." *Canadian Children's Book News*, vol. 41, no. 3, Fall 2018, pp. 4–7. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=llf&AN=132006827&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 12 Dec. 2022.

Omer, Ardo. "*Escape from Syria*." *Quill & Quire*, vol. 83, no. 10, Dec. 2017, p. 47. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edo&AN=126012824&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 7 July 2022.

Onega, Susana and Jean-Michel Ganteau, editors. *Contemporary Trauma Narratives*. Routledge, 2014.

O'Sullivan, Joanne. "Fall Flying Starts." *Publishers Weekly*, vol. 269, no. 53, Dec. 2022, pp. 44–49. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=160881598&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 27 Feb. 2023

Oswell, David. *The Agency of Children: From Family to Global Human Rights*. Cambridge University Press, 2013. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat08646a&AN=mtsu.3ddad33a.6203.4dba.9a7c.287074cc1a80&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 4 June 2022.

Palmer, Alex W. "The Turning Tide." *The New York Times Magazine*, Mar. 2022, p. 28. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsglr&AN=edsglr.A695812120&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 25 Mar. 2022.

Panero, Maria Eugenia, et al. "Does Reading a Single Passage of Literary Fiction Really Improve Theory of Mind? An Attempt at Replication." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 111, no. 5, Nov. 2016, pp. e46–54. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1037/pspa0000064.supp (Supplemental). Accessed 4 Nov. 2022.

Papailias, Penelope. "(Un)Seeing Dead Refugee Bodies: Mourning Memes, Spectropolitics, and the Haunting of Europe." *Media Culture & Society*, vol. 41,

no. 8, Nov. 2019, pp. 1048–68. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1177/0163443718756178. Accessed 4 Aug. 2022.

Parekh, Serena. "Reframing the Refugee Crisis: From Rescue to Interconnection." *Ethics & Global Politics*, vol. 13, no. 1, Jan. 2020, pp. 21–32. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1080/16544951.2020.1735013. Accessed 4 Ma. 2022.

---. *Refugees and the Ethics of Forced Displacement*. Routledge, 2017. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat08646a&AN=mtsu.7f051d44.6836.46f1.9492.2cafd7fb2dd3&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 14 June, 2022.

Paulus, Jochen. "An Krisen wachsen." *Psychologie Heute*. June 2020. https://www.psychologie-heute.de/leben/artikel-detailansicht/40494-an-krisen-wachsen.html

Pearlman, Wendy. *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria*. HarperCollins, 2017.

Pennell, Victoria. "*Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey*." *Resource Links*, vol. 22, no. 1, Oct. 2016, p. 11. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=118951715&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 9 Nov. 2022.

Rahimi, Alhan. *Yara, My Friend from Syria*, illustrated by Anahit Aleksanyan. 2016.

Ratini, Terri. "*Refugee*, by Alan Gratz, New York City." *American Journal of Qualitative Research (AJQR)*, vol. 3, no. 2, Dec. 2019, p. 97. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.29333/ajqr/6432. Accessed 1 Nov. 2022.

Raúf, Onjali Q. *The Boy at the Back of the Class*. Penguin Random House LLC, 2019.

---. *The Day We Met the Queen*. Orion Children's Books, 2020.

Read, Jen'Nan Ghazal, and John P. Bartkowski. "To Veil or Not to Veil? A Case Study of Identity Negotiation among Muslim Women in Austin, Texas." *Gender & Society*, vol. 14, no. 3, June 2000, pp. 395–417. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1177/089124300014003003. Accessed 15 Feb. 2023.

"refugee, n.". Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford University Press, July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4829684540. Accessed 8 Aug. 2023.

"Refugee Statistics." *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.* https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/. Accessed 18 May 2022.

Reynolds, Kimberley. *Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2011.

Rizzo, Suzanne Del. *My Beautiful Birds*. Pajama Press, 2020.

Rowland, Leslie. "Second Reaction: *Refugee* and *The Odyssey*: Connecting the Ancient, the Past, and the Present." *First Opinions, Second Reactions*, vol. 11, no. 2, Sept. 2018, pp. 33–35. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=132677554&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 1 Nov. 2022.

Rubik, Margarete. "Transcultural Studies and Novels for Young Readers: The Refugee Experience in Alan Gratz's *Refugee* and Gillian Cross' *After Tomorrow*." *Acta Neophilologica*, vol. 52, no. 1–2, Dec. 2019. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.4312/an.52.1-2.5-29. Accessed 1 Nov. 2022.

Ruurs, Margaret. *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey*, artwork by Nizar Ali Badr. translated by Falah Raheem. Orca Book Publishers, 2016.

Said, Edward. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard UP, 2000.

Saleh, Yassim Al-Haj. *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*. Haymarket Books, 2017.

---. "Das vergitterte Herz," translated by Christian Sälzer. *Frankfurter Rundschau*. Donnerstag, 22 April 2021. 77 Jahrgang, NR. 93. pp. 18-19.

Sanna, Francesca. *Me and My Fear*. Flying Eye Books, 2018.

---. "Teaching Empathy for a Better World." *Knowledge Quest*, vol. 46, no. 5, May 2018, p. 70. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsgao&AN=edsgcl.539773323&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 9 Nov. 2022.

---. *The Journey*. Flying Eye Books, 2016.

Sanyal, Deborati. "Calais's 'Jungle': Refugees, Biopolitics, and the Arts of Resistance." *Representations*, no. 139, July 2017, pp. 1–33. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.26420608&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 4 Ma. 2022.

"Saving Stella: A Dog's Dramatic Escape from War." *Kirkus Reviews*, vol. 88, no. 16, Aug. 2020, p. N.PAG. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lxh&AN=145074434&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 4 Ma. 2022.

Savsar, Leyla. "'Mother Tells me to Forget': Nostalgic Re-presentations, Re-membering, and Re-telling the Child Migrant's Identity and Agency in Children's Literature." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 4, winter 2018, pp. 395-411.

Schäfer, Annette. "Das Porträt: James Pennebaker: Der Schriftgelehrte." *Psychology Heute*. November, 2011.

Schmidt, Jana. "An Uncertain Movement: Bertolt Brecht's *Refugee Conversations*." *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 50, no. 3, fall 2020, pp. 297-320. *Project Muse*, https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2020.0019. Accessed 4 Ma 2022.

Senzai, N. H. *Escape from Aleppo*. Simon & Schuster, 2018.

Shamma, Yasmine. "'Heaven is Green: The Ecoglobalism of Refugee Desert." *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 50, no. 3, fall 2020, pp. 321-38. *Project Muse*, https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2020.0013. Accessed 22 Feb. 2022.

Sherlock, Ruth, Scott Neuman, and Nada Homsi. "Syria's Civil War Started a Decade Ago: Here's Where It Stand." 15 Mar. 2021. *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/2021/03/15/976352794/syrias-civil-war-started-a-decade-ago-heres-where-it-stands. Accessed 1 Mar. 2023.

Smith, Helena. "Bard College Berlin Student Sara Mardini Arrested for Aiding Refugees in Greece." *US Official News*, 11 Sept. 2018. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohostcom.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsgin&AN=edsgcl.554053467&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 25 Mar. 2022.

Smith, Julia. "*My Beautiful Birds*." *Booklist*, vol. 113, no. 9/10, Jan. 2017, pp. 102-03. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-

com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=120654844&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 12 Dec. 2022.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Righting Wrongs." *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 103 no. 2, 2004, pp. 523-581. *ProjectMuse,* muse.jhu.edu/article/169150. Accessed 14 June 2022.

Stampfl, Barry. "Parsing the Unspeakable in the Context of Trauma." *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, edited by Michelle Balaev. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Stansfield, John, and Louise Bunce. "The Relationship Between Empathy and Reading Fiction: Separate Roles for Cognitive and Affective Components." *Journal of European Psychology Students*, vol. 5, no. 3, July 2014, pp. 9–18. *EBSCOhost,* https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.5334/jeps.ca. Accessed 4 Nov. 2022.

Strekalova-Hughes, Ekaterina. "Unpacking Refugee Flight: Critical Content Analysis of Picturebooks Featuring Refugee Protagonists." *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, vol. 21, no. 2, Jan. 2019, pp. 23–44. *EBSCOhost,* https://searchebscohostcom.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1222952&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 14 June 2022.

Stuber, Dorian, editor. *Critical Insights: Holocaust Literature*. Gray House Publishing, 2016.

Sukkar, Sumia. *The Boy from Aleppo Who Painted the War*. Eyewear Publishing, 2013.

"Syrian Author Nadine Kaadan: 'Writing Was My Way of Processing the War.'" *Arab News* [Jeddah, Saudi Arabia], 16 Sept. 2019. *Gale OneFile: News,*

link.gale.com/apps/doc/A599661794/STND?u=tel_middleten&sid=ebsco&xid=d3469b4e. Accessed 24 June 2022.

"Syrian Conflict Captured in Debut Novel by Kingston University Creative Writing Graduate." *European Union News*, 30 June 2014. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsggo&AN=edsgcl.373290820&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 12 Dec. 2022.

"Syrian Refugees Detailed in New Children's Book." *CTV News Channel*. https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/video?clipId=1027767. Accessed 12 Jan, 2023.

Taylor, Adam. "In Aleppo's Misinformation War, a 7-Year-Old Girl Prompts a Fact-Check." *Washington Post*, 14 Dec. 2016. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A473838932/AONE?u=tel_middleten&sid=ebsco&xid=36fb5e77. Accessed 24 Ma. 2022.

"*The Journey*." *Publishers Weekly*, vol. 263, no. 49, Dec. 2016, p. 33. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=119832833&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 9 Nov. 2022.

Trezine, Bryoni. "Minor Representations: From Anne Frank to Bana Alabed – The Radically Performative Literacies of a Viral Child." *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. 56, no. 2. Doi: 10.1093/fmls/cqaaoo6. Accessed 24 Ma. 2022.

Turcott, Ryan, and Emma S. Ariyo. "Disrupting the Global Refugee Crisis or Celebrity Humanitarianism? Media Frames of the Refugee Olympic Team at 2016 Rio and 2020 Tokyo Summer Games." *Sport in Society*, vol. 25, no. 3, Jan. 2022, pp. 671-

86. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1080/17430437.2022.2017828. Accessed 25 Mar. 2022.

van der Kolk, Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Random House, 2014.

Vickory, Laurie. *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*. U of Virginia P, 2002.

Warga, Jasmine. *Other Words for Home*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2019.

Weisman, Kay. "*A House without Walls*." *Booklist*, vol. 117, no. 13, Mar. 2021, p. 56. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsglr&AN=edsglr.A655229162&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 29 Nov. 2022.

Woods, Kerri. "Refugees' Stories: Empathy, Agency, and Solidarity." *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 51, no. 4, Dec. 2020, pp. 507–25. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pif&AN=PHL2407658&site=eds-live&scope=site. Accessed 2 Sept. 2022.

Wyness, Michael. *Childhood*. Polity Press, 2015.

Xu, Man. "Constructing the Refugee: Comparison between Newspaper Coverage of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Canada and the UK." *Current Sociology*, vol. 69, no. 5, Sept. 2021, pp. 660–81. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.1177/0011392120946387. Accessed 4 Ma. 2022.

Yalim, Asli Cennet, and Isok Kim. "Mental Health and Psychosocial Needs of Syrian Refugees: A Literature Review and Future Directions." *Advances in Social Work*,

vol. 18, no. 3, Sept. 2018, pp. 833–52. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/10.18060/21633. Accessed 4 Ma. 2022.

Yazbek, Samar. *The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria*. Rider Books, 2016.

Zusak, Markus. "Bonus Material." 2016. *The Book Thief*. Penguin Random House, 2005.